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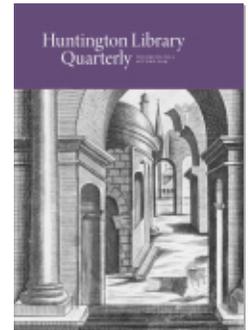
Succession: Fearful Anxiety, Exhilarating Hope

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Huntington Library Quarterly, Volume 82, Number 3, Autumn 2019, pp. 483-489  
(Review)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hlq.2019.0023>



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## REVIEW ESSAY

# Succession: Fearful Anxiety, Exhilarating Hope

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Arthur Williamson

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Paulina Kewes and Andrew McRae, editors  
*Stuart Succession Literature: Moments and Transformations*  
OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2019  
XV + 371 PAGES; ISBN: 9780198778172

Michael Questier  
*Dynastic Politics and the British Reformations, 1558–1630*  
OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2019  
XVII + 499 PAGES; ISBN: 9780198826330

❧ IN 1590 ANNA OF DENMARK was crowned queen (consort) of Scotland. To celebrate the occasion King James asked the preacher, professor, and poet Andrew Melville to compose some suitable verses. Despite short notice, Melville produced the complicated *Στεφανισκιον ad Scotiae Regem, habitum in coronation Reginae* (Little garland given to the king of Scotland on the coronation of the queen). In it he specifically declined to say whether the king had been “selected as the best from the people, or born from your ancestors onto the throne, whether by new law, or ancient custom.” But he was emphatic: the legitimate king was bound by law, and, yet more salient, brought the people with him through assent, not compulsion. If monarchy was firmly grounded, so too was civic engagement. Melville went further still. Anna marked a great turning point, literally the “hinge” to the future, not only securing the dynasty but also readying it for the decisive struggle against “the seven citadels and ramparts of Rome.”<sup>1</sup> James was thrilled and ordered the *Στεφανισκιον* published immediately.

1. Melville, *Στεφανισκιον* . . . (Edinburgh, 1590). My colleagues Paul McGinnis and Mark Riley have assisted my reading of this poem, an interpretation based on the edition published on the Bridging the Continental Divide project website: Andrew Melville,

Succession studies have become quite fashionable in recent years, and understandably so, for regime change inherently raises questions of legitimacy, the nature of the polity, the selection process, and—not least—the mission and defining purposes of the dynasty or of the realm it led. We will find this true even for relatively modest successions like Anna’s. Yet the Edinburgh celebration seems to differ strikingly from the focus and preoccupations of modern historiography. Today’s analyses, as varyingly illustrated by the two books under consideration, labor to show that nothing with regard to succession was at all inevitable or in any way automatic. The matter of Elizabeth’s successor was gravely fraught, “dangerous and doubtful” in the language of contemporaries; the prospect of civil war and foreign intervention loomed as very real possibilities. James’s accession was in no way assured, and, with the exception of his son, that of every successor through the coming of the Hanoverians proved problematic if not openly contested. The watchword was deep anxiety rather than high aspiration, insecurity far more than hope.

This style of inquiry finds itself anchored in the “revisionist” perspective that emerged as part of a much larger, indeed tectonic cultural shift in reaction against the 1960s. It involved a vast retreat from public culture and civic identities. Anti-Marxist, anti-liberal, and anti-Protestant, all often blanketed under the rubric of Whig teleology, revisionism emphasized tradition, conservatism, and the resilience (and importance) of authority—while discounting ideology, religious doctrine, and vocabularies of social change. Continuity in outlook closely coexisted with contingency in the event. Revisionism emphasized functional comparisons rather than deeper cultural connections or intellectual transformations. Modernity emerged as an inadvertent and problematic phenomenon, while a preoccupation with blood and tradition—dynastic or tribal—frequently fueled authoritarian, irredentist, and nationalist counter-historiographies. More recent qualifications, often very loosely termed “post-revisionism,” failed to overturn revisionist assumptions.



To be sure, historical writing within this frame can lead to powerful insight, and the volume edited by Paulina Kewes and Andrew McRae is one such. Each of the sixteen essays in the collection will prove significant, but Richard McCabe’s analysis of 1603 panegyrics and David Colclough’s discussion of accession sermons for James I and his son illustrate the strengths and limitations of revisionist perspectives. McCabe develops at length the deep anxieties felt on both sides of the border at the prospect of the regnal union. The extravagant claims of poets and prose writers on behalf of a

Στεφανισκιον *ad Scotiae Regem habitum in coronation Reginae, 17 Maii 1590* (“The Small Garland given to the King of Scotland on the coronation of the Queen, 17 May 1590”), ed. and trans. David McOmish and Steven J. Reid, accessed June 5, 2017, [https://www.dps.gla.ac.uk/delitiaie/display/?pid=d2\\_MelA\\_002&aid=MelA](https://www.dps.gla.ac.uk/delitiaie/display/?pid=d2_MelA_002&aid=MelA).

primordial Britain, drawing on Galfridian mythology and tales about the eponymous Brutus of Troy, served to face down “visceral fear in manufactured euphoria” (22). Their task proved formidable: deep unease at a foreign king, the nightmare of a Scottish conquest, and an abiding dislike of Scotsmen rendered the moment fraught and dangerous. Now all of this is certainly true for conservative Englishmen, especially those already exercised by the prospect of further reform. Not everyone agreed; some instead saw the moment as a great, even providential opportunity to realize the promise of the Reformation. McCabe notices the reformer (and union enthusiast) Andrew Willet but declines to regard him and his like as significant. Perhaps he should have, for the British project as an eschatological engine of reform had become a fixture within both Scottish and English political thought since the days of the Protector Somerset in the 1540s. John Thornborough, the radical bishop of Bristol, and the Scots Presbyterian David Hume of Godscroft worked within this frame (quite possibly together)—and they thought they were the majority. Even so, Sarah Waurechen and others have doubted whether Scotophobia was as pervasive or reflexive as modern historiography assumes. Englishmen “riddled with anxiety” (23), aghast at the thought of a Scottish king, certainly existed in significant numbers, but political fissures rather than monolithic nervousness will guide us through the dynamics of 1603.

Colclough agrees that there existed “as much anxiety as optimism” (207), but on his telling optimism emerges in short supply, and the implications of that optimism barely surface at all. The aspirational dimension is absent from most of the essays, as well as from the general cast of the volume, and it becomes hard not to think that *Stuart Succession Literature* both manifests and speaks to our current political moment.

Christopher Highley shows that Charles II’s return in 1660 carried with it deeply religious implications and revitalized conservative and Catholic styles of piety. While it was crucial for his publicists to show that Charles had not wavered in his Anglican faith, the narrative of his domestic exile immediately after Worcester, and subsequent exile on the Continent, would be cast within the vocabulary of Catholic exilic suffering and pilgrimage. This idiom fit well with the hugely promoted and highly catholicized cult of his father’s “martyrdom” (80), nominally Anglican but drawing on relics and material things touched by the royal blood as devotional objects. This reversed the long-standing trend toward secularization, whereby such objects became items of historical curiosity rather than linkages with the divine. This “slippage” (92) formed part of a far broader process of sacralization that extended to monarchy itself, and Highley’s essay shows what a profoundly reactionary moment the Restoration actually was. These developments not only penetrated the textures of English spirituality but also bore far-reaching consequences for English institutions and political life—even reaching, Holly Brewer has argued, as far as the rise of race-based slavery in the Anglophone world.<sup>2</sup>

2. Holly Brewer, “Slavery, Sovereignty, and ‘Inheritable Blood’: Reconsidering John Locke and the Origins of American Slavery,” *American Historical Review* 122 (2017): 1038–78.

In the longest essay of the collection, Paulina Kewes leads us to a most extraordinary conclusion. Through an analysis of an enormous swath of seventeenth-century radical political writing in England, she shows that one of the foundational texts within the Atlantic republican tradition was written by a Jesuit. Robert Persons's *A Conference about the Next Succession* (1594/5) had a very long life that the author could hardly have intended, or even imagined. To be sure, Persons's purpose was mischievous: he hoped to sow tensions, indeed wreak havoc within the late Elizabethan court, yet centrally he sought to undermine James VI's succession to the southern crown. His considered reflections on authority through inheritance, election, and political action took on a life of their own. *A Conference* encountered flak from the outset from many directions, not least from the Scottish Jesuit William Creighton. No Catholic seems ever to have used it, or more likely ever went near it. For Persons wrote what turned out to become a resoundingly Protestant tract, in complete contrast with the remainder of his oeuvre. In the end Kewes wonders why English radicals drew on what was inherently such a tainted source and, worse, a work that was all but assured to be exposed as such. Her account presents a major finding and shows what this line of approach can achieve.

Malcolm Smuts punctures feminist posturing in his discussion of "Royal Mothers, Sacred History, and Political Polemic" and shows that misogyny was far less prevalent than commonly portrayed—notably by Frances Dolan and Laura Knoppers. Instead it would surface only in response to specific moments of crisis and in particular contexts. Smuts's contribution also takes up the celebrations associated with Anna's coronation in Scotland, which he rightly recognizes as an emphatically Protestant event, its significance articulated through lavish staging and preaching by the prominent Presbyterian minister Robert Bruce.

Unsurprisingly, the occasion stressed the British project and promoted James's claim to the English throne. This contribution is the only one in the volume to notice Andrew Melville. Oddly enough, Smuts chooses to notice, though not cite directly, Melville's *Principis Scoti-Britannorum natalia* (1594), composed for the birth of Prince Henry, rather than the *Στεφανισκιον*—which, unlike the *Natalia*, actually does comprise succession literature.

Smuts rightly observes the ongoing anxiety with regard to the possibility of a Catholic dynasty. Yet his contribution stands out in portraying the aspirational fissures and ideological cleavage within the early Stuart world. James and his son Charles came to embrace conservative passivity, celebrated by Ben Jonson's stagings of Augustan-age peace, fertility, tradition, and hierarchy. Against this were ranged Prince Henry and his glamorous sister Elizabeth, who sought to confront the advancing Counter-Reformation and emerged potentially as major actors in the struggle to realize the historical redemption. Henry and his sister were hugely popular with the British public—and arguably the only genuinely popular Stuart princes.

It is hard to imagine Queen Henrietta Maria, Charles's Catholic wife, as a heroic figure in the confrontation against the papal Antichrist. Yet during the 1630s

she was just that because of Richelieu and the French struggle against the Habsburgs and their papal ally during the final phases of the Thirty Years' War. Henrietta Maria's image turned about completely during the civil war in the 1640s as she sought to finance her husband's armies in the struggle against Parliament.

In the end, Smuts stresses that critique of the monarchy in the earlier seventeenth century, as with Thomas Scott's *Vox Populi*, focused on civic virtue rather than directly on sexuality or gendered power. Although scurrilous sexual libels about king and court go back at least to the time of James I, after 1689, such accounts of royal intimacies emerged with the purpose of desacralizing the monarchy (as well as titillation) in ways similar to that analyzed by Robert Darnton and many others in eighteenth-century France.

Revolution shifts the meaning of words and the implications of genre. The accession of Richard Cromwell in 1658 and William III in 1689–91 hardly comprised successions in the usual sense, and the literature they generated transformed as a result. Steven Zwicker, John West, Andrew McRae, and Mark Knights variously examine how this transition, most notably with regard to the panegyric, occurred through these moments and after. The great era of the panegyric ended with James II, as monarchy became desacralized, as participation and public culture gained what appeared at the time to be an enduring foothold. If the roles of agency and ideological purpose are limited, the volume's achievements remain of the first order.



*Stuart Succession Literature* is a powerful book in the revisionist tradition. Michael Questier's *Dynastic Politics and the British Reformations* is not. It is, however, an angry one. Questier seeks to provide a counter (that is, Catholic) narrative to the standard "Whiggish" account that he viscerally despises and regards as Protestant triumphalism. Appropriately enough, his volume runs from the closure of Mary Tudor's regime to 1630: the moment of the Counter-Reformation's greatest triumphs in the Thirty Years' War and the moment when authoritarian monarchy and conservative religion triumphed or appeared to triumph in Britain. Questier declines to see the Counter-Reformation as reaching the British Isles during a later period, the typical view, and instead suggests that conservatism and counter-reform proved integral to the very process of reformation.

Now his project is potentially quite promising, a new and interesting, if deeply reactionary, take on arguably the most axial moment in the British experience. Unfortunately, Questier does not provide anything of the sort. Instead of an alternative vision, we encounter 500 closely printed pages of granular narrative that does not much differ from the "Whiggish" version he holds in such contempt. Perhaps unsurprisingly, his narrative is heavily dependent on secondary sources, as Questier admits in what is effectively the penultimate line of his book. Yet, quite astonishingly,

Questier regards Ireland as beyond his scope and not central to the narrative of counter-reform within the British Isles.

Again and again, Questier's anti-ideology, revisionist mind-set undoes him. Knox's *First Blast* emerges conventionally as "heroically ill-timed" (25) rather than the treatise of Anglo-Scottish union that contemporaries and now modern historiography recognize it to be. Far worse, Questier shortchanges such significant English counter-reformers as William Allen, Richard Verstegan, and Robert Persons. Verstegan's and Persons's deep aversion to the idea of Britain, seen as a Protestant construct but also having a racial dimension, never emerges. The anti-Scottish element in the strategy of the Guy Fawkes plotters barely surfaces. The argument with reformers like Knox took place in many registers. Even so, if we want to understand the significance and long reach of Persons's *A Conference* and go beyond the commonplace, we need to turn to Professor Kewes. The intellectual richness of such significant Catholic works as *The Treatise of Treasons* (1572) and a tract commonly known then and now as *Leicester's Commonwealth* (1584) fails to become evident. James's apocalyptic works are noticed because a Catholic critic mentions them, yet no analysis of their meaning and significance ever appears.

At most we get an occasional aside that suggests something new. Mary Tudor turns out to be a more successful political operator than Elizabeth, competently stabilizing her regime, despite missteps, while her half-sister remained continuously vulnerable. Questier's Mary Stewart too becomes a shrewd strategist, resolutely independent of her family in France, whose confessional bridge-building anticipated her son's reassertion of royal authority in the 1570s and 1580s. Her flight south in 1568, Questier tells us, was not the impulse of some silly dimwit, but a daring political masterstroke that raised the succession issue in ways that contrived to be at once legitimist and *politique*. Yet these are few. Overwhelmingly, we encounter a fairly standard cut and thrust retelling. Questier does speak of James's "random waves of Blairite meaninglessness" (266), though still insisting that the king was no "Yeltsin-style figure" (278); James's middle-way policies are deemed "weird and wonderful" (339). In the end, Questier argues, drawing heavily on Mark Kishlansky and Kevin Sharpe, the Stuart monarchy turned to authoritarian rule, politically and religiously, not as a fallback from constitutional failure but as the logical strategy for dynastic success. But his brief conclusion fails to refocus the course of the book, and we will search in vain for a coherent alternative to the familiar narrative. There surely exists an authoritarian, monarchist, and Catholic counterreading of the Reformation in the British Isles. But Questier has not provided it.



Revisionism emerged in the 1970s as part of a deeply conservative and skeptical cultural-political reaction against earlier hope and earlier progressivist visions. At moments it enabled us to see the early modern period in new ways; at other moments

it spoke more to the authors' contemporaneous agenda. The books under review provide examples of each. The larger question is: How do we get beyond revisionism and the culture wars that have dominated our recent past?

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