

Royalists at War in Scotland and Ireland, 1638-1650

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Reviewer: Chris R. Langley

Building on his work on the Huntly family in the north-east of Scotland, Barry Robertson's latest monograph chooses to shift the usual historiographical focus from the Covenanters and the Irish Confederates to an attempt to understand royalism in Scotland and Ireland.⁽¹⁾ Seen in the same light as recent work by Andy Hopper and Matthew Neufeld, Robertson's book seeks to understand the motivations that pushed individuals to fight for a certain cause and how identities developed in response to changes in the Irish and Scottish political landscape.⁽²⁾

The author orders the book's chapters chronologically, usually treating Irish and Scottish developments separately. The author's main concern is to interrogate the utility of the term 'royalist'. This immediately connects this study with a growing corpus of literature on royalist identities in England. Robertson expertly outlines the nature of this debate in the English context and underlines the difficulty of neat categorisations. Instead, Robertson wishes to differentiate between the loose coalition of those who, at one time or another, fought in a royal army. Seeing royalism as a spectrum, the key term for the author is 'monarchist': those who were generally loyal to the idea of monarchy but could be swayed to fight against the Crown in certain circumstances. Importantly, this was not a one-way process. Individuals could shift between fighting for causes quite easily. In this, Robertson identifies how radical elements in the Covenanter leadership could easily alienate moderates like the Marquis of Montrose.

The fluidity of identity is something that Robertson shows throughout the volume. He highlights the looseness of the Irish Catholic Confederation with aplomb (p. 96) and makes similar assertions relating to the division between war and peace parties in the royalist leadership in Scotland (pp. 127–9). Identifying individuals to populate these groupings is sometimes a problem, though. While Robertson does not seek to make definitive characterisations of individuals, finding evidence for personal motivations proves more difficult. Beyond the most vocal examples, Robertson can only argue from silence. Following the Covenanter victory in the Bishops' Wars, Robertson struggles to identify anything more than the most vocal royalists stating 'many undoubtedly sought to maintain a low profile, hoping to occupy a neutralist position in as far as this was possible' (p. 65). The author grapples with similar problems in his attempts to find a moderate royalist coalition in Ireland following the Solemn League and Covenant in 1643 (p. 119).

The author deliberately limits the scope of the study to the nobility, eschewing recent approaches that have pursued 'popular royalism'. While one feels there is value to doing this, the rationale provided is not particularly strong. At various points, the reader is informed that although the popular approach is important to studies of England, the author feels there is 'less scope' to successfully do so in a study of Scotland and Ireland because 'it is clear that the driving force of the Scottish and Irish royalist movements' was the nobility. This sentiment does not always hold true in the discussion that follows. In his analysis of the astonishing change in royalist identities in Ulster in 1645, the author concedes that 'momentum in favour of the Solemn League and Covenant in Ulster came from below' and that prominent Ulster landlords 'found themselves pushed along by events' rather than holding agency themselves (p. 115). There are flashes of this kind of agency in the lower orders elsewhere in the book (particularly p. 83). These episodes raise the possibility of a greater degree of social agency than the author allows. Ultimately, one suspects that the nature of the source material pushed the author towards following an approach that focused primarily on the nobility.

Limiting the discussion to the upper echelons of society does provide a clear focus, though. One must applaud the author's ability to outline the complex variations of Scottish and Irish politics with such a degree of clarity. This approach provides welcome detail showing the incredible delicacy of royalist decision making. One would like to single out Robertson's exposition of the Engagement deserves for particularly high praise. The Engagement arose from a moderate royalist desire to aid the king against the English Parliament despite vehement opposition from the Covenanter leadership. Robertson explains how these plans should not be considered royalist but as an attempt to gain 'monarchists' who were increasingly frustrated with the Covenanter leadership (pp. 153–5). This complex political development has provided a perennial thorn in the side of scholars especially when trying to teach this topic to undergraduates. Robertson presents a compelling narrative of the rise of this enterprise.

Along the way, Robertson's careful analysis seeks to rescue a few historical actors from their usual negative stereotypes. The two who stand out in this spirit of reappraisal are James Butler, Duke of Ormond and James Hamilton, Duke of Hamilton. The work rejects portrayals of Ormond as self-seeking and underlines the fragility of Ormond's negotiations for peace throughout the 1640s with great skill. Robertson argues that Ormond actually put forward clear and consistent bases in his peace negotiations. Moreover, Ormond was very aware of alienating different interest groups by taking a rather cautious tone in any negotiations (p. 101). Robertson's treatment of Hamilton makes a similar effort to underline the complex decisions that royalist leaders faced. For the most part, Hamilton is shown constantly scheming to create a moderate royalist/monarchist coalition. Robertson's exposition of the complexity of royalist decision-making raises the age-old question of Charles I's culpability in the conflict. At a number of key junctures, the author returns to the 'confusing and contradictory nature' of Crown policy (p. 105). In this scheme, the author gives agency to key figures but any culpability is largely down to the management of the Stuart kings.

Robertson's efforts in considering the complexities of the term 'royalist' are not matched by his rather broad acceptance of religious labels. The use of the term 'Kirk Party' seems particularly jarring in a book that prides itself on problematising labels (p. 189). Similarly, the rather brusque use of the term 'non-conformist' to relate to Presbyterian communities in Ireland (p. 85) seems to ignore how 'conformity' changed throughout the period. The assertion that Scottish royalists were not intent on protecting Episcopalianism in the same manner as their English counterparts is fascinating but needs more detail on the differing positions of the English and Scottish episcopate (p. 193). These questions arise, in part, from Robertson's own insistent critique of homogenous labels and introduce interesting avenues for future work.

As a study of noble, royalist, identity in Ireland and Scotland, this book will stand as an important resource for researchers and their students. By connecting with issues of definition discussed by historians of English royalism, Robertson provides a timely update to the seminal work David Stevenson while adding to the findings of Robert Armstrong and Keith Brown more recently.⁽³⁾ Moreover, this work is part of a wider dynamic that elevates studies of Ireland and, particularly, Scotland to a point where historians of other

regions cannot help but take note. Robertson's study allows readers to appreciate the complexity of Irish and Scottish decision making and the active political landscape in both territories. The fortunes of the constituent kingdoms of Britain and Ireland were inextricably linked but they still held considerable potential for difference. Robertson's book is an important milestone in our appreciation of the differences of British and Irish experience.

Notes

1. Barry Robertson, *Lordship and Power in the North of Scotland: The Noble House of Huntly, 1603–1690* (Edinburgh, 2011).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Andrew Hopper, *Turncoats and Renegades: Changing Sides during the English Civil Wars* (Oxford, 2012); Matthew Neufeld, *The Civil Wars after 1660: Public Remembering in Late Stuart England* (Woodbridge, 2013).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. David Stevenson, *The Scottish Revolution, 1637–1644* (2nd ed., Edinburgh, 2003); David Stevenson, *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Scotland, 1644–1651* (2nd ed., Edinburgh, 2003); Robert Armstrong, *Protestant War: The 'British' of Ireland and the Wars of the Three Kingdoms* (Manchester, 2005); Keith M. Brown, *Noble Society in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2000).[Back to \(3\)](#)

I felt that this was a well balanced, thoughtful and constructive review and I am happy to accept it without any further detailed comment of my part.

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