Regency in Sixteenth-Century Scotland

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In August 1569, Queen Elizabeth I roundly rebuked James Stewart, earl of Moray, then regent to the three-year-old James VI, for presuming that ‘ther were any equalitie … betwixt us and yow’ (p. 232). Until recently, the idea that regents were fundamentally different political animals to monarchs had also been widely assumed by early modern historians: regencies represented moments of political disturbance, aberrations in the traditional pattern of hereditary succession that were only righted when the anointed sovereign either came of age or returned from abroad to reclaim personal rule. Yet questions about the nature and extent of regency power are particularly important in the context of 16th-century Scotland when, due to a run of royal minorities (James V became king aged 17 months in 1513, Mary I succeeded him at only six days old in 1542, and James VI was crowned one month after his first birthday in 1567), the kingdom was effectively governed by eight different regents, whose combined time in office totaled over 50 years.
Amy Blakeway's thoroughly researched, deftly written and highly informative book reveals that, far from being a disruptive digression in the otherwise steady narrative of royal power, Scottish regency was characterized by a greater degree of continuity than has hitherto been acknowledged. Individual regents were preferred to regency councils in order to replicate the personal style of adult monarchical rule, and in some ways even did a better job of fulfilling expectations of good governance (such as more regularly attending judicial ayres, going on more progresses, and spending significantly less crown money) in order to legitimise their authority. Contemporaries often referred to regents as 'princes', and although their inaugurations took place in the secular context of parliament rather than the sacred realm of a church, they effectively exercised the same power and authority as a monarch in financial, judicial and diplomatic affairs – even holding magnificent courts and engaging in cultural patronage. Yet Blakeway is also quick to note that this appearance of continuity should not be overstated: in an age when personality largely determined the nature of royal office, each regent brought a different governmental style, which in turn frustrates attempts at generalization. Nonetheless, Blakeway convincingly shows that most of the regents from this period demonstrated consistent attempts to adhere to contemporary expectations of good governance, and even those who have traditionally come across as weak and ineffective (like James Hamilton, second earl of Arran), on closer examination ‘emerge as more conscientious, active, and even more effective, than they have hitherto been perceived’ (p. 236).

In addition to dispelling myths of discontinuity, Blakeway argues that Scottish regency underwent a significant conceptual shift during the 16th century. At the beginning of the century, regents were selected either according to the will of the deceased monarch, or by appointing the infant monarch's closest blood relation. However, in response to the complex set of political expediencies arising from Mary I's deposition in 1567 and the increasing influence of George Buchanan's theory of elected monarchy, the King's Party developed a new understanding of regency that placed elective power squarely in the hands of the nobility and estates. (Indeed, Buchanan was present at the York-Westminster conference where the King's Party statement was first aired, making his involvement in the drafting highly likely.) Thus, when James VI's paternal grandfather, Matthew Stewart, earl of Lennox, was appointed regent in July 1570, his former claim to the regency in 1543–4 based on his place in the succession was removed in favour of an argument based primarily on election. This trend was further confirmed by the appointment to the regency in September 1571 of John Erskine, earl of Mar, who became the first regent not closely related to the monarch by blood, as well as the only one to combine his role with keeper of the king's person (a position traditionally separated from the office of the regent). Moreover, James VI's regents were expected to consult their councils far more often than their predecessors.

Blakeway organizes her study thematically around several key issues relating to regency government, providing a nuanced interpretation that draws on deep immersion in a range of archival sources, including not only letters, council registers and treasury accounts, but also coins, tapestries and architecture. The introduction locates her study within the larger historiographical context with great civility and care, providing an informative overview of significant contributions to the field by scholars such as Jenny Wormald, Julian Goodare, Roger Mason, Alec Ryrie and others. She also explains her decision to side-step the potential pitfalls of separating her analysis into chapters like ‘politics’, ‘religion’ and ‘women’, modern categorizations which potentially eliminate a more nuanced understanding of the time. While acknowledging that contemporary attitudes to women clearly influenced how female rule was conceived in the early modern period, Blakeway argues that ‘the specific challenges facing female regents are best understood as one of, and integrated amongst, the many factors that affected any period in office’ (p. 13). An instance where gender clearly did make a difference was when Margaret Tudor forfeited her regency and tutorage of James V upon re-marriage to Archibald Douglas, earl of Angus, since according to civil law conventions she passed into the legal curatory of her husband. On the other hand, the fact that John Stewart, duke of Albany's regency was later challenged (albeit unsuccessfully) on the grounds that he was a foreigner unable to speak Scots illustrates that there were many factors that might stand in the way of a regent's right to govern, and Blakeway's careful synthesis of the available evidence bears out the wisdom of her approach.
The first two chapters examine the theory and practice of regency, providing a useful foreground to the following thematic chapters. In light of the fact that there was no Scottish statute specifying how regency should be determined, Blakeway charts the various ways regency was defined historically: by 'monarchical nomination, hereditary right, and election by the political community' (p. 19). This flexible framework proved beneficial, since it allowed for adaptation to changing political circumstances. Even when a deceased ruler had made provisions for the regency via a written testament, there remained sufficient wiggle-room for debate and reinterpretation to suit prevailing political needs. Although queen mothers were considered a safe choice given their natural inclination to protect their offspring, the Scottish regency was not 'gendered female' as it was in France, given the dictates of Salic law. Traditionally, the regency passed to the infant monarch's closest relation, but as Blakeway argues, 'a new understanding of regency emerged which challenged, but never entirely superseded, these older concepts' in 1568, when the King’s Party overruled the objections of William Maitland of Lethington and Sir William Kirkcaldy of Grange that election was 'without a precedent or example' (p. 52).

Regardless of the method for gaining office, the ceremonial surrounding the inauguration of a regent mimicked royal coronation, but also differed in significant ways that served to emphasise the non-sacral nature of the regent's power. Interestingly, regents attended council meetings much more frequently than monarchs did, likely because they owed their legitimacy and continued exercise of power to the support of the estates. Although it was unusual for a regent to be deposed before a monarch came of age or returned from abroad to govern in person, the fact that Albany was ejected from office in 1524 after failing to return to Scotland when he promised shows that even hereditary claims to power were only upheld at the estates' pleasure. The Lords of the Congregation similarly appealed to the overriding power of the estates to depose an unsuitable regent during the Reformation Rebellion of 1560, which effectively ended Marie de Guise's authority months before her death settled matters irrefutably. Moreover, the acts of revocation that a monarch could enforce once they reached the age of 25 provided a check on regency power, since any lands regents gifted to subjects might have to be returned later.

One of the most interesting discoveries in Blakeway's book emerges from her investigation of regency finances in chapter three. Drawing on extensive analysis of treasury accounts (working around their frustrating gaps) and taking inflation and the distortions of rolled-over debt into account, Blakeway reveals that regents were not the profligate spenders they have typically been painted as, but were in most cases far more frugal than their royal counterparts. This was partly because regents were expected to use their own personal wealth to support their personal expenses, and also because several regents came to power following prolonged and financially ruinous conflicts. Blakeway identifies a financial 'tipping point' in 1546 (the middle of the Rough Wooings), when it became impossible for the crown to balance income and expenditure. These findings significantly revise the earl of Arran's reputation as a spendthrift, which Blakeway argues fails to take these mitigating factors (along with changing accounting practices) into account. On the other hand, Blakeway confirms that James Douglas, earl of Morton was indeed guilty of embezzling crown funds, as he was thought to be. This chapter includes several very useful tables laying out the details of Blakeway's findings, although the graphs are a little more difficult to read at a glance.

Blakeway's detailed discussion of finances leads smoothly to a chapter on regency households and courts, which opens with a vivid description of the 1549 marriage celebrations of Barbara Hamilton, the eldest daughter of Arran (then duke of Châtelherault), which bears all the magnificent hallmarks of a royal wedding. As Blakeway explains, such opportunities for extravagant display allowed regents to distribute patronage among the nobility and to reassert royal authority. Political crisis placed constraints on expenditure, just as it did during majorities, but court entertainments remained essential as a means for the nobility to socialize with and counsel their ruler. For the same reason, regents travelled widely, though progresses also allowed them occasionally to return home to ensure their responsibilities as local landowners were being adequately fulfilled. Nevertheless, Edinburgh's increasing gravitational pull as the center of political, financial and military affairs reflects the long-term trend towards administrative centralization. In a fascinating sub-section on art and image-making, Blakeway reveals the subtle but significant messages
conveyed through coinage to project an association between regency and royal power.

One of the essential duties a monarch performed was the administration of justice, and the ways in which regents adapted to and exercised this role 'both as a duty and as a mechanism of obtaining obedience' is Blakeway's focus in chapter five. Against the shifting backdrop of multiple, overlapping court jurisdictions and the increasing professionalization of the law, Blakeway illustrates that the regent's role in 'holding the realm in quietness' remained a crucial function of their position, regardless of their personal reputation for integrity (p. 163). The ability to resolve disputes equitably and fairly was something regents, who were typically also landed magnates, were expected to have experience in, although their local connections in a case might compromise their claim to impartiality. More controversially, however, regents could grant remissions for crimes, allowing cases to be settled out of court in exchange for compensation to the victim's family and payment of a fine to the crown. This provided a lucrative sideline for sticky-fingered regents like Morton. Nonetheless, Blakeway's fascinating investigation of regency involvement in judicial ayres shows that, like courtly progresses, the administration of justice in the localities helped build and reinforce relations between regents and subjects.

After extensive discussion of how regency was conceived and practiced within Scotland, Blakeway's final chapter on diplomacy reveals the many ways that external observers interpreted the authority of regents. Minorities were particularly vulnerable periods for Scottish rulers, as the Rough Wooings fought over custody of Mary proved only too clearly. Elizabeth I also contemplated raising the young James VI at her own English court in order that he might 'enjoy quyetness' (p. 193), and later in his reign she employed a rhetoric of motherly affection to both counsel and censure him, echoing Henry VIII's intention to treat the young James V 'as a moste loving fader wolde do with his goode son' (p. 208). Another reason regents were often perceived as vulnerable to foreign attack was that 'a question mark' hung over their ability to declare war (p. 196). Blakeway draws attention to Henri II's domination of Scottish foreign affairs following Mary's betrothal to his son, François, although more successfully with respect to the Low Countries than to Rome (which supported Châtelherault's right to appoint benefices). Marie de Guise's diplomatic powers to conclude treaties were uniquely limited because she represented an adult monarch living abroad, although she continued to correspond with other rulers on behalf of her daughter Mary's interests in Scotland. Blakeway provides fascinating insight into how diplomatic letters could reflect ideas about sovereignty and power through the example of Moray's selective signature following his election as regent in August 1567: in correspondence with the sympathetic Cecil, Moray signed himself 'James Regent', but in letters addressed to the unconvincing Elizabeth, he used his old signature, 'James Stewart' (p. 214). By contrast, Frederick II of Denmark-Norway signaled his recognition of James VI's right to rule almost immediately, as his form of address to 'Jacobo scotorum Regi' makes clear.

In addition to the compelling content of her argument, the appendices at the back of Blakeway's book provide a wealth of data and information for further investigation. Although the conclusion ties the various strong and subtle strands of her analysis together very successfully, I did come away with some questions to continue the conversation:

1) Although the ideal of an adult monarch clearly provided the template for good governance and the exercise of power that a regent was expected to follow, how did the experience of a succession of regencies influence the way royal authority was conceived of and practiced over time? It appears that once monarchs came of age, they spent more, attended counsels and judicial ayres less, and generally (and ironically) failed to live up to the standards set by their regent stand-ins. Are there any examples of regency track-records being used to 'reign in' royal power?

2) The ways in which royal authority was ventriloquized by regents in diplomatic correspondence are intriguing. In the course of my own research, I have noted a distinction between the form (e.g. address, language choice and signature) of personal letters written directly to foreign rulers by the regent, and what appear to be more formal diplomatic letters written by the regent in the name of the monarch. What circumstances might have determined the regent's choice between these two kinds of letters? In light of
Blakeway's excellent discussions of numismatic evidence, I wonder if she detected any changes in the iconography of royal seals on letters, proclamations or warrants.

3) On p. 231, you suggest that one of the defining features of James VI's minority was that 'no foreign power sought to develop a comparable relationship with Scotland', and that Elizabeth's 'reluctance' to do so reflected 'the practical fact that as an infant male James VI was worth less to Elizabeth, a childless woman many years his senior' than the infant Mary had been to Henry VIII. Yet earlier on p. 193, you noted that Cecil and Elizabeth had been hatching a plan to bring baby James to the English court as early as July 1567, presumably on the assumption that he would be raised there as Elizabeth's closest kin and next heir, after Mary. Elizabeth was also James' godmother, and although she was initially reluctant to acknowledge his accession, is there any evidence that she might have been playing a double game: making a public show of protestation in favour of Mary, while allowing her principal secretary to establish close ties with the King's Party?

These questions spring from personal interest rather than anything lacking in the text as it stands. Amy Blakeway's book makes a significant contribution to the field, and will be essential reading for future students and scholars interested in this crucial period of Scottish history.

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