

'The Contending Kingdoms': England and France 1420-1700

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Glenn Richardson's latest contribution to early modern Anglo-French relations comes in the form of this edited volume covering nearly three centuries of contact between England and France from 1420 to 1700. *The Contending Kingdoms* is essentially the proceedings of a *Society for Court Studies* conference which took place in London in November 2004. The conference, and indeed this book, marked the centenary of the *entente-cordiale* signed by Britain and France in 1904. The contributors, based mainly in England and France, reflect on a century's worth of Anglo-French historical research. Framed between two treaties (Troyes and the Spanish Partition Treaties), the underlying hypothesis is that, despite bouts of conflict, England and France enjoyed significant periods of peace and cooperation which cultivated great cultural, political and mercantile interaction. There was, however, an almost sibling-like relationship between England and France: shaped by petty squabbles, violent episodes and competition mirrored in the rhetoric of Francis I and Henry VIII. There are three obvious themes within the book: comparison, cooperation and ecclesiastical involvement in government.

The treaty of Troyes, signed in the aftermath of Agincourt on 21 May 1420, effectively created a 'dual monarchy', bestowing the title 'King of England and France' on Henry V and his successors in perpetuity. Anne Curry's contribution, 'Two Kingdoms, One King: The Treaty of Troyes (1420) and the Creation of a Double Monarchy of England and France', stresses the diplomatic brilliance of the treaty as it was 'skilfully worded to fudge the past' avoiding Henry's 'existing claim to the throne' (pp. 26–30). Curry suggests that in fact Henry's son, Henry VI, was the first and only 'dual' monarch. Significantly, the treaty, in creating a 'union of two crowns' rather than a union of two countries, called for an end to all 'dissensions, hatreds, rancours, and conflict between the two kingdoms and their people': an *entente-cordiale* of its own (p. 40).

We soon encounter the comparative themes within the book. Robert Knecht, in his 'The French and English Nobilities in the Sixteenth Century: A Comparison', provides an overview of noble membership on both sides of the Narrow Sea. Knecht notes the shared Anglo-French heritage of the feudal, Christian nations during the Middle Ages, not to mention the overlapping spheres of authority in western France due to English continental expansion as discussed by Curry. While the two nations shared aspects of common heritage, they branched out over time resulting in three primary areas of difference: 'size and structure, wealth and power' (p. 65). While he makes light work of the issue of the definition of nobility, Knecht's treatment of the nobility on either side of the Channel does appear to place disproportionate emphasis on the

French élite. Moreover, once we approach the issue of gentry definition, Knecht seems to sidestep the problem, approaching the issue from a quantitative rather than qualitative approach. Perhaps Knecht could have consulted Peter Coss's excellent definition in his *The Origins of the English Gentry* as a point of reference.⁽¹⁾

From the outset, in her treatment of Elizabeth I and Catherine de' Medici, Susan Doran defends her choice of subject: a comparison between two contemporaneous powerful women. Principally, the criticism stems from Catherine de' Medici being neither French nor queen regent of France while Elizabeth was an English queen. However, Doran justifies her decision suitably, stressing the significance of Catherine's influence as *la reine mere* although, as we discover, their relationship was by no means equal. Indeed, Doran presents Catherine as a mother-in-law figure to Elizabeth. There were clear differences in personality, notably religion, education and style. Despite the apparent personality clash, the achievement of this chapter is Doran's ability to piece together the women's shared characteristics. Doran notes that politically both put 'short-term benefits before long-term considerations' and recognised the importance of religious toleration. Doran also suggests that both held a similar stance on Mary Queen of Scots, for Elizabeth feared the threat she posed to her crown while Catherine was wary of her Guise connections. Thus, they were able to cooperate with each other towards respective domestic security. As for marriage, Doran revises the traditional view that Elizabeth was pursued by the French suggesting that Elizabeth was equally proactive in negotiations (p. 130). Instead, Doran argues that Anglo-French marriage overtures failed simply due to irreconcilable religious incompatibility.

The editor's own contribution, 'The French Connection: Francis I and England's Break with Rome', explores the cooperative role of Francis I in Henry's diplomatic efforts to secure his divorce. Richardson provides a sense of the mutual frustration experienced by both England and France during the late 1520s and early 1530s. Richardson argues that following the rise of the Boleyn faction at court and Francis's apparent support for Henry's case, by March 1531 challenging the *legal* rather than *spiritual* papal jurisdiction became the focus of French diplomatic activities with England. Richardson suggests that Henry interpreted Francis's verbal assurance as an outright endorsement of his divorce campaign. Here we reach the crux of Richardson's argument: that by 1532, Henry and his chief minister Thomas Cromwell did not act in isolation in their manoeuvres against the papacy. Rather, while making their own legislation, Francis provided the support and encouragement which 'stealed Henry's nerves' in return for Henry's assurances of military assistance (p. 102). Yet, Richardson also convincingly portrays a real sense of panic in Henry's own mind. In this chapter, Richardson not only turns the traditional view of the English Reformation as a 'quintessentially English phenomenon' on its head, he in fact convincingly pushes back the limits of Anglo-French cooperation over Henry's 'Great Matter' by some three years, suggesting the lines of diplomatic communication remained open until late 1534, rather than late 1531 (p. 113).

Charles Giry-Deloison's, 'France and England at Peace, 1475–1513', stresses that despite the seemingly constant warfare between England and France, with the exception of October–November 1492, the nations experienced peace lasting 38 years, from the Treaty of Picquigny (29 August 1475) to Henry VIII's first military campaign of 1513 which stimulated Anglo-French mercantile and cultural interaction. This chapter is split in three distinct sections of Anglo-French interaction: trade, war and culture. The latter focuses in particular on the use of political tracts in the 'formation of public opinion', introducing the plausible concept of battles being fought 'in print' (p. 50–4). Giry-Deloison cites Picquigny as a turning point in Anglo-French relations as it allowed both sides to deal with domestic stability and for trade and cultural exchange to flourish, although this was essentially a one way flow from France to England. To sum up, trade benefitted France while cultural exchange benefitted England. Giry-Deloison makes the point that France acted as a 'facilitator' of Italian art from the continent to England. However, England's retreat from French territory from c.1400–50 resulted in a decline in Anglo-French cultural exchange. However, Giry-Deloison's list of printers active in France and England may have worked better as an appendix rather than being part of the body of the text as it acts as a distraction from the discussion about the impact of cultural interaction. Additionally, throughout the volume, with the exception of the introduction, the authors have segmented their work through the use of bold subtitles. However, this chapter employs the use of mid-page asterisks

which creates a break in continuity. Perhaps a revised edition of the work might take this into account.

There is also a visible contradiction. Richardson is keen to make the point early on that 'rather than being unremittingly hostile ... early modern Anglo-French relations are perhaps better described as ambivalent in the true sense of the word' (p. 1). Yet, the cover displays a detail of the Battle of the Spurs (16 August 1513), in which a combined English and Imperial army routed the French forces forcing a humiliating and devastating defeat. While the Battle of the Spurs is mentioned in Giry-DeLoison's chapter as marking the end of a culturally and economically lucrative period in Anglo-French relations, perhaps Holbein's 'The Ambassadors' might have been a more suitable alternative for two main reasons. First, the painting is featured in Richardson's own chapter and, second, it neatly encapsulates most of the book's themes of political and cultural communication.

David Onnekink's chapter, 'Anglo-French Negotiations on the Spanish Partition Treaties (1698–1700): A Re-evaluation', aims to put Anglo-French relations into a wider European perspective. Onnekink offers a 'third perspective': rather than the failure of negotiations around the partition treaties stemming from either animosity or even misunderstanding between William III and Louis XIV, Onnekink suggests that both parties genuinely intended to create a settlement. However, neither party was able to uphold the treaty due to shifting circumstances and allegiances. This assessment comes from an assessment of William III's later years: a much understudied area. The focus of the chapter is the earl of Portland's embassy to France which Onnekink notes was one of the 'grandest' of the 17th century, costing some £48,000. Onnekink's central hypothesis is that William and Louis's relationship was not one of animosity but of 'shrewd and cynical calculation' (p. 170). The Second Partition Treaty was the product of a breakdown in William III's foreign policy through weakening British military strength. Consequently, the treaty, signed in March 1700, was very much favourable towards the Archduke Charles and the dauphin. Onnekink suggests that British 'weakness' was ultimately the cause of the European conflict. Onnekink concludes by suggesting that, in contrast to the historiography, Louis XIV accepted the will of Carlos II because he felt that neither Britain nor the United Provinces in 1700 was able to uphold the treaty or an alliance of this kind.

Geoffrey Elton may have approved of Cedric Michon's contribution, with its treatment of personalities as political forces. In his 'Pomp and Circumstances: State Prelates under Francis I and Henry VIII', Michon provides a useful assessment of the function of ecclesiastics within government, introducing the idea that state prelates were the 'third pillar' of government. As for similarities, Michon suggests that Anglo-French prelates were comparable in size, number and wealth. However, when calculating the comparative numbers of prelates and their wealth, Michon does not always show his working out. The purpose of the chapter seems to be to highlight the dissimilarity between the 'third pillar' in England and France. The point, claims Michon, is that while the French prelates were of noble birth, their English counterparts were forced to climb the greasy pole. Indeed, Michon suggests the French prelates were able to exploit their familial contacts while the English ecclesiastics used their university contacts – the 'Cambridge Connection' – as a kind of extended family: perhaps taking *alma mater* too literally. Michon suggests these class boundaries prevented the English prelates from integrating into court society and, in a way, created a lucid distinction between the various 'pillars' of state. However, the chapter seems unevenly balanced, providing an initial comparison and then propounding his 'Cambridge Connection' theory at length. Moreover, the 'Cambridge Connection' is not entirely convincing as it only seems to apply to a brief period before the 'laicisation' of government. It is indeed unsurprising that Old Boys would recommend their fellow graduates to lofty positions. It seems to some extent inevitable that the pool of ecclesiastics graduating from their theological and civil education would encounter each other in court circles.

While England experienced some continental influence during the early 15th century, by the mid 17th century England had become only peripherally significant politically and militarily. As Loïc Bienassis writes, the common historical perspective is that by the time of the Thirty Years War, Britain held a 'secondary place' in international politics. The purpose of Bienassis's contribution, 'Richelieu and Britain (1634–1642)', is to revise this view by stressing the importance of British neutrality during the conflict. After establishing Richelieu's 'firm policy towards Spain', Bienassis provides an outline of relations

between England, France and Spain in the early to mid 17th century. Bienassis neatly covers James I's failed Anglo-Spanish enterprise, attempts at Anglo-French cordiality through Charles I's marriage to Henrietta Maria, the disaster at La Rochelle and the subsequent peace agreements with France in 1629 and Spain in 1630. The fallout of this was Britain's poor standing as a potential ally on the international stage and particularly with Richelieu. After the treaty of The Hague (1635), however, France began to look for support from Britain in the form of a defensive alliance. Richelieu's approach towards Britain became focused on destroying potential Anglo-Spanish relations and bringing England under French influence. Chiefly, as noted by Bienassis, Britain was an attractive potential ally as she could muster a vast naval fleet and call on 'a wealth of manpower' (p. 141). This interest in Britain resulted in a proposed alliance treaty in June 1637 which would have procured British military support for France, effectively drawing Britain into the Franco-United Province bloc. However, the treaty was never signed due to 'deep-rooted distrust' and, once again, Britain turned to Spain as an ally. At this critical time, Charles was distracted by the Bishops' Wars in Scotland. In direct contrast to Samuel R. Gardiner's view, Bienassis remains convinced that Richelieu was indeed involved in fanning the flames of the Bishops' Wars by secretly mustering Scottish troops.⁽²⁾ Indeed, as Bienassis puts it, 'what better means of neutralizing Britain ... than to have her engulfed in a civil war?' (p. 145). While this idea may not be completely new, Bienassis makes a compelling argument. Perhaps some consideration of Charles I's wider domestic agenda may have provided a more complete survey of Anglo-French relations.⁽³⁾ This chapter provides an important re-evaluation of the British role in the Thirty Years War and, importantly, the author's revisionist sentiments climax in a call for other 'peripheral' powers to be studied to understand the conflict in a wider European context.

In 'A Stranger Born': Female Usage of International Networks in Times of War', rather than examining diplomatic relations as such, Sonja Kmec focuses on Anglo-French relations in a more literal sense. Indeed, Kmec examines the marriage between the French Protestant Charlotte de La Trémoille and her English husband James Stanley, Lord Derby. Kmec discusses the creation of alternative networks based on religion and kinship in order to ease her transition to life as an English wife with the use of some very rich sources covering some 40 years. The de La Trémoille family were not so much concerned with the Stanley family's manxian assets but rather the possibility of creating links with Henrietta Maria. Indeed, Charlotte's Protestantism itself was an asset at court: her religion could offset Henrietta Maria's growing public image as an overbearing queen actively involved in dictating English religious policy. As Kmec points out, it is of significance that she never turned to France for fear of appearing a papal sympathiser. However, the chapter's title is slightly misleading. The point is that Charlotte de La Trémoille was able to use both her own and her husband's familial connections to integrate into English political society throughout the period in question which was *most* beneficial during times of war. It was not used exclusively for that end as the title suggests. Indeed, the chapter's success is that it covers a number of issues associated with repatriation, if that's not too anachronistic a word.

Gestures and tensions have continued to characterise Anglo-French relations even since the centenary of the *entente cordiale*. Indeed, in the time that has passed since 2004, we have witnessed a much publicised state visit to Britain by President Sarkozy in which talk of a renewed *entente* came to the fore. More recently, however, we have seen the underlying tensions between the nations in the wake of the alleged royal 'snub' by Sarkozy in his apparent failure to invite Queen Elizabeth II to Normandy to commemorate the 65th anniversary of the allied landings in 1944. Taken together, this collection of essays provides an important reassessment of Anglo-French relations very much in keeping with Richardson's recent tendency towards moderate revisionism. What remains to be seen is whether *The Contending Kingdoms* continue to cause mutual 'irritation and fascination' (p. 1) in the century to come.

Notes

1. P. Coss, *The Origins of the English Gentry* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 1–11.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. S. R. Gardiner, *History of England from the Accession of James I to the Outbreak of the Civil War, 1603–1642* (10 vols., London, 1883), x, pp. 383–6.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. R. Cust, *Charles I. A Political Life* (London, 2005), pp. 124–130.[Back to \(3\)](#)

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