

*Charles I and the People of England.* David Cressy.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. ix + 448 pp. \$49.95.

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Just before his execution in 1649, Charles I addressed a crowd of his subjects on the “liberty and freedom” of “the people” of England, defining these as the “having” of laws rather than the making of them, and enshrining in English popular royalism a notion of “the people” as recipients rather than agents of government. In a sense, the subject of *Charles I and the People of England* — the myriad relations of king and people in early Stuart England — reads the history backwards, from Charles’s speech on the scaffold to his accession in the very different political environment of 1625. David Cressy frames the study as “a social history of early Stuart kingship, a political history of popular culture, and a cultural history of English politics in the second quarter of the seventeenth century” (7). One of the book’s important descriptive arguments concerns the sheer complexity of interaction between the Crown and its more than four million subjects, presented in chapters on ceremonies, including the 1626 coronation; on petitions and court cases; on religious proclamations and performances; and on royal progresses, all in recognition of the extent to which most early modern English encounters with royal authority were encounters with the Crown, not with the royal person. Subject and sovereign may have been “clean different things,” as Charles said on the scaffold, but in this sense they had come into increasingly regular contact during the early seventeenth century.

In general, Cressy supports the view that this growing familiarity with royal authority and symbols in their institutional settings did not produce a stable relationship between Charles and his subjects, tending to generate more opposition and even resistance — especially on

religious grounds — than a sense of common purpose. “Charles I clung to a vision of sacred kingship, from his accession in 1625 to his execution in 1649” (7), and this inflexibility or even “blindness” (306–13) serves as a foil to the changing attitudes of various people, mostly English, toward their sovereign across his eventful reign. This is not a new interpretation of the Caroline regime, but Cressy brings many fresh archival illustrations to bear on his presentation of this “tortured relationship between King Charles and his people” (7). The opening episode of Lucy Martin’s message, wrapped around a rock and thrown into the royal box at an outdoor sermon on Palm Sunday, 1626, beautifully encapsulates the convergence of personal anxieties and grievances on the king’s person, the elaboration of screens to restrict access to the king as well as their limitations, heightened awareness of threats to the kingdom’s security, and the difficulties of generalizing from such evidence to the broader strengths and weaknesses of a complex political society. On occasion, an example falls short of supporting the interpretive line. For example, Cressy presents the familiar crowd violence of the 1630s in the Forest of Dean as a characteristic case of Caroline sociopolitical polarization (47–49), but the Dean forest eyre of 1634, the highest royal court for the forest, does not support his view of a king aligned with large-scale land enclosers at the expense of smaller farmers and commoners.

As a general approach to Charles’s reign, this interpretation does run the risk of explaining why the king never formed an effective party to fight the Civil War, and Cressy’s relative neglect of the 1640s makes sense, at the same time that it leaves the important problem of popular royalism largely unexamined. By the time of his death, Charles had engaged with the politicized question of “the people’s safety,” even in defeat, with an effectiveness that frustrated his political enemies, whose unity and power to speak for “the people” had become increasingly open to doubt. Moreover, it remains difficult to turn the Caroline regime’s English limitations into direct causes of its demise. Some opponents of the Caroline forest policy during the 1630s, for example, became Royalists after 1642. “Almost every area of Caroline religious policy sparked controversy” (252), but even this “flaw” led more to “inconvenience” or “anxiety and resentment” (253) than to fatal crisis. When examined through the lens of the interrelationship between Charles I and the English people, it appears that the connection between the internal dynamics of the Caroline regime and the English Revolution remains as equivocal as ever.

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