

*The Murder of King James I.* Alastair Bellany and Thomas Cogswell.  
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King James VI of Scotland was born in 1566 in Edinburgh Castle, the only son of Mary, Queen of Scots, and Lord Darnley, both of them descended from Henry VII of England. James inherited the English throne in 1603 on the death of the childless Elizabeth, and took the additional title of King James I. After the uncontested accession, and the 1604 peace with Spain that ended the long Armada war, the rest of his reign was less auspicious. Wastefully extravagant, obsessed with hunting, and devoted to male favorites, notably George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, James had little success in handling English parliaments. The death in 1612 of his senior minister, Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, removed the last of Elizabeth's great Privy Counsellors, and the death of his popular son and heir, Prince Henry, was a further blow. James remained securely on the throne but his subjects became increasingly critical, particularly after the outbreak of European war in 1618.

The king died in 1625 at his country mansion of Theobalds in Hertfordshire, which survives only as a park with scattered ruins. His health was uncertain: his passion for hunting occasionally resulted in serious falls, and he avoided London, his capital city, which he dismissed as "that filthy Town." Then in late spring 1626, George Eglisham, a Scottish Catholic, published a scurrilous pamphlet, *The Forerunner of Revenge*, which sensationally claimed that the king had not died a natural death, but had been murdered by Buckingham. Depicted as a monster of insatiable ambition, the duke (assisted by his sinister mother) had given James unauthorized medicines. Buckingham was also allegedly asserting an unsuitable dominance over the young King Charles I. Copies of the pamphlet were scattered in the streets and sent directly to courtiers and noblemen. The duke was impeached in the Parliament of 1626, and assassinated in 1628. These events, dramatic enough in themselves, took place against a background of European turmoil. The peace with Spain, celebrated by the treaty of 1604, had largely collapsed by 1625, as the Thirty Years' War raged in Continental Europe. The public execution of James's heir Charles I in 1649 unleashed a further wave of radical and millenarian

speculation. After the Glorious Revolution of 1688–89, numerous publications also recycled the narrative of James's death, frequently taking the opportunity of castigating Stuart monarchs for their extravagance and misrule.

This substantial volume (618 pages) contains a detailed account of these events. Readers should not be put off by its over-assertive title. Almost certainly, James was not murdered, however inappropriate the medicines administered to him. Nevertheless, the death in 1612 of his elder son, the energetic and vigorous Henry, Prince of Wales, underlined the ignorance of senior physicians and the worrying repercussions of any royal death. After his accession in 1625, the young Charles I was scurrilously depicted as an accessory to the alleged murders of his father and brother, throwing the legitimacy of his own rule into question. The crisis of the 1640s, with Eglisam's venomous pamphlet and other libelous materials in widespread circulation, helped to create the political climate that led to the execution of Charles in 1649. Scholars will attribute different aspects to the terrible warfare of the 1640s and its political origins. However, Bellany and Cogswell have illuminated a key episode: their scholarly and readable analysis provides a substantial addition to our understanding of these crucial and complex years.

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