

## Review Article

# Dynastic history from a Catholic perspective

Susan Doran

*Professor of Early Modern British History, Senior Research Fellow,  
Jesus College and St Benet's Hall, University of Oxford.  
Email: [susan.doran@history.ox.ac.uk](mailto:susan.doran@history.ox.ac.uk)*

Michael Questier, *Dynastic Politics: The British Reformations 1558-1630*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. xvii, 528, £35.00 ISBN: 9780198826330

As is evident from the title, the link between the 'Reformation' and royal dynastic politics in England and Scotland is the subject of Professor Michael Questier's new book. Like other scholars, Questier recognises that Britain's religion depended upon the outcome of royal biology and succession politics, although unlike many of them he chooses to start his story in 1558, to cover what he calls the 'post-Reformation period', rather than in Henry VIII's or Edward VI's reign. Also following other scholars, Questier appreciates that changes in religion made dynastic politics 'ideologically fraught' and that dynastic politics, such as the Anjou match, could 'stir up conflict over religion'. As he admits, there is little new information in the book and 'much of what is in it should be recognizable to those with a working knowledge of the period' (p.7).

Questier's explicit claim to originality lies in his attempt to avoid present-centredness by recovering the voices and narratives of post-Reformation Catholics, who ultimately lost out in the process, and to bring them into the mainstream so that their history is not ghettoized. This approach is certainly worthwhile, but not perhaps as novel as he asserts. Both he and other historians, including Victor Houlistan, Peter Lake, Thomas McCoog SJ, Paulina Kewes, and Alexandra Walsham, have already done a great job in reintegrating Catholics in Reformation, and post-Reformation historiography.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately,

<sup>1</sup> See as examples, Victor Houlistan, *Catholic Resistance in Elizabethan England: Robert Persons's Jesuit Polemic, 1580-1610* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007) and 'Filling in the Blanks: Catholic Hopes for the English Succession' *SEDERI Yearbook*, núm. 25 (2015), 77-104; the essays in Peter Lake and Michael Questier, eds. *Conformity and Orthodoxy in the English Church c. 1560-1660* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000) and in Susan Doran and Paulina Kewes, eds. *Doubtful and Dangerous: The Question of*

Questier does not always give these scholars their due: the text contains no historiographical survey, there is no bibliography, and the many citations sometimes omit relevant recent scholarship.

Questier offers in the main a dense and quirky narrative of dynastic history, written largely from a Catholic perspective, that looks beyond England to Britain, and beyond Britain to affairs on the Continent. The interconnectedness of the different occurrences he relates has the merit of bringing home to readers just how difficult it was for policy makers to make sense of - and deal with - the events confronting them at the time. This approach shows, too, how no event or publication existed in a vacuum but was connected in various ways to others. Unfortunately, though, the skipping from one country to another, especially in the chapters covering the Elizabethan period, makes for a challenging read. While the lack of an explicitly analytical framework for his chapters and a meta-narrative is useful in hammering home the contingency of events, a consequence of this is the sense of history as one damn thing after another.

Another problem is that Questier really needed to explain some of the terms he uses. It would have been instructive for example, to learn why he prefers 'Post Reformation' to 'Reformation', given that the struggles for the religious future of England and Scotland were at the heart of the period. A discussion of the terms 'politique' and 'via media', including how they were understood at the time, would have enabled readers to understand why he chose these words to characterize the balancing act which James carried out in relation to Puritans and Catholics. Readers unfamiliar with the historiography also probably needed to know whether 'crypto Catholics' are the same as 'conformists' and what exactly Questier means by 'popular politics'.

Questier's first four chapters take us chronologically through the reign of Elizabeth I. The first (c.1558-1571) opens with a brief summary of Mary I's reign. Here, we learn that Questier is at one with today's historians who have rehabilitated her regime, and he concludes the 'Marian Prelude' with a judgment that could easily be used in future examination questions: 'Mary was infinitely more successful than Elizabeth ever really was' (p. 13). Questier builds on this, in later chapters, to suggest that Elizabeth was probably the least successful of Britain's 'post-Reformation' monarchs.

In the Elizabethan chapters, Questier plaits together the strands of political unrest in Scotland, France, the Netherlands, and Ireland to provide both the narrative and explanatory tool. As just one example,

*Succession in Late Elizabethan England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); and Alexandra Walsham, *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity, and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1993) and *Catholic Reformation in Protestant Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2014).

he shows how the Jesuit preaching campaign in 1580 coincided – though not coincidentally – with the Lennox ‘turn in Scottish politics’, the Irish Catholic risings, and Anjou’s interventions in English politics. Similarly, Questier situates Catholic polemical tracts within both a British and Continental context. The 1572 *Treatise of Treasons*, which gave a Catholic counterfactual interpretation of the previous ten years, he explains, was a response to the ‘polemical ordure’ dumped on the Scottish Queen. The three pamphlets produced by Catholics in 1584 (*Leicester’s Commonwealth*, William Allen’s *True, Sincere and Modest Defence* and John Leslie’s *Treatise Touching the Right . . .*) arose out of the British and international situation – the Association scheme, the failure of the Throckmorton Plot, and events in the Netherlands. Persons’s *A Conference About the Next Succession* was a reaction not only to the troubles of the Holy League in France and ‘the decline of Spanish military power’ but also to James’s ‘politique solution to civil strife in Scotland’. Here, Questier’s book sits alongside Peter Lake’s *Bad Queen Bess?* by offering further context for the polemical texts that are the subject of Lake’s book.<sup>2</sup>

Otherwise in these four chapters, Questier is keen to show how Elizabeth was far from the Protestant Gloriana. In the first chapter devoted to the long 1560s, she is explicitly compared unfavourably with Mary Queen of Scots. The latter’s policies in Scotland, Questier maintains, were intelligent and successful in contrast to the ‘mess’ resulting from Elizabeth’s interventions in Scotland and France. In their relationship, moreover, Elizabeth was always on the backfoot while Mary won their dynastic struggle on points. It was only Mary’s ‘bizarre’ marriage to Bothwell that pressed the ‘self-destruct button’ and turned the tide of her fortunes. Even then, as a prisoner in England, Mary is praised for ‘a high-stakes but well-informed intervention in the English succession question’ which could have well played out differently: maybe resulting in Mary’s restoration to Scotland, a Howard marriage, or even possibly a successful rebellion in the North. While Mary played the role of a legitimist and ‘politique’, gaining support from both sides of the confessional divide, Elizabeth floundered around out of her depth. In his treatment of the Scottish Queen, Questier hits out against traditional or gender-based treatments but surprisingly chooses not to engage directly with John Guy’s influential *My Heart is My Own’: The Life of Mary Queen of Scots*.<sup>3</sup>

In later chapters, Elizabeth is implicitly compared unfavourably to James VI. In chapter three (1582-93), Questier describes the Scottish

<sup>2</sup> Peter Lake, *Bad Queen Bess: Libels, Secret Histories and the Politics of Publicity in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> John Guy, *My Heart is My Own’: The Life of Mary Queen of Scots* (London: Fourth Estate, 2004).

king's success in shaking off the Ruthvenites and, from 1583 to 1586, in 'running a form of subscription campaign in Scotland of a kind which, however inadequate its enforcement, the new archbishop of Canterbury, John Whitgift, could only dream about' (p. 151). After the fall of Arran in 1586, James is reckoned adept in managing the Catholic earls and manoeuvring 'to considerable effect' between 'frankly incompatible positions'. In chapter four (1593-1603), despite stumbles along the way, James emerges as a successful 'politique' ruler. During the Bothwell crises, he 'manoeuvred' critics 'into a scenario of mutually assured destruction' (p. 214). With the return of the Catholic earls in 1596, he imposed a 'Stuart *via media*' that included toleration and advancement for conformist Catholics. The Gowrie conspiracy was a 'stunning coup' as it 'rolled up and crushed opposition to the king' (p. 242); James's religious ambiguities aided his road to the English throne.

By contrast, Elizabeth's foreign policy was a 'trainwreck' and, while at home the Babington conspiracy was 'distinctly weird', its outcome was a 'bungle'. When discussing the Spanish Armada, Questier quotes Mendoza's opinion that 'the English ships, like Elizabeth's troops, had been rubbish', and he bewails how the Armada has become 'the stuff of mind-numbing patriotic legend' (p. 183). What is forgotten, Questier explains, is how it 'radicalized both Scots and French politics and divided Elizabeth from her Dutch allies' (p.183). As for Essex in Ireland, Questier's sympathies are clear: he tells us that 'the string of ludicrously wordy and vicious hate-mail denunciations' Essex received in Ireland must have made the earl 'wonder whether he was not facing more hostility from Elizabeth than from Tyrone'; and he considers that Essex took a dignified stance when answering 'the frankly hysterical rhetoric coming from London' (pp. 253-4). Essex's downfall was engineered by enemies who argued that his strategy in Ireland was part of his policy to appeal to Catholics demanding tolerance in return for political obedience. So, although Essex and his friends complained about evil councillors, as in Catholic polemic, his enemies on the council denounced the attempted 'putsch' of 1601 as a popish conspiracy (incidentally, Alexandra Gajda's important essay on 'Essex and the "popish plot"' is unmentioned).<sup>4</sup>

Dynastic politics under James as king of England covers three and a half chapters. They are worth exploring here in some detail to get a flavour of Questier's interpretation of James as a 'politique' king who was trying to pursue a '*via media*' confessional policy. In Chapter 5 (1603-10), Questier begins with Catholic hopes for toleration on James I's accession. He focuses on Robert Persons's about-turn,

<sup>4</sup> Alexandra Gajda, 'Essex and the popish plot' in Susan Doran and Paulina Kewes, eds. *Doubtful and Dangerous: The Question of Succession in Late Elizabethan England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 115-33.

stemming from his belief that he could now do business with the new king, and the loyalist petitions of English Catholics, lobbying for a change to the Elizabethan Church Settlement. There were many good reasons for Catholic optimism, not least James's parentage, his wife's conversion, and his own previous dealings with Catholics. But Questier claims it was largely because of James taking 'a consciously politique stance' (p. 277) and displaying a new inclusiveness that 'set up a parallel debate about toleration' for Puritans and Catholics (p. 279). Visible signs of James's new approach for Catholics included the partial remission of fines for those convicted of recusancy and the arrival of priests coming into England from the Continent. Puritans, meanwhile, took hope from the summoning of the Hampton Court Conference. During this climate of partial tolerance, the 'Bye Plot' was concocted, but Questier leaves unexplained why previously loyalist Appellants should have conspired to mount an action against the king before his position hardened later that year.

By the end of 1603 and in 1604, James withdrew from the policy of partial tolerance towards Catholics. Questier seems to attribute this change in direction also to the king's pursuit of a *via media* religious policy in England. The re-imposition of the full penalties for separatism (Questier's usual term for recusancy) was timed, he asserts, 'to balance' the campaign against puritan nonconformists. However, this interpretation might be challenged. After all, before 1603, James had made incompatible promises to both Catholics and puritans in order to win their support for his claim to the English throne, and he could not afford to alienate either group until he felt sure that no rival claimant, at home or from abroad, would challenge his accession. He probably never had any intention of granting partial toleration to Catholics or allowing Puritans deviations from the Prayer Book which he had approved in 1604. Doing so would run the risk of destabilising the royal supremacy, a matter of great importance to him. After all, he tried to impose his supremacy over the Kirk in Scotland both with the 'Black Acts' of 1584 and the Five Articles of Perth in 1617. Therefore, as soon as he could in England, he demanded attendance at Protestant Church services and conformity to the Prayer Book, a demand surely incompatible with a 'politique' stance. Nonetheless, it is possible that the Catholics got it wrong by taking James at his word.

As Questier shows, James's retreat from partial toleration resulted in Catholic riots in Herefordshire and alarmist reports of Catholic agitation in the dioceses of Bath and Wells, Chester, and St Asaph. These culminated in the Gunpowder Plot. What interests Questier here is the Plot's historical significance, and he draws attention to three themes that once again interlink events in England with those in Scotland, Ireland, and the Continent. First, he argues that the recusancy legislation of 1606 'served to balance out' the proceedings James had recently

taken against Andrew Melville and other dissident churchmen in Scotland and was synchronized with the treason trials of six refractory Scottish ministers in January 1606 – another example, Questier suggests, of James pursuing a *via media*. Second, James's *Apologie* in defence of the oath of allegiance was, in Questier's judgment, very possibly designed as part of a programme to forge 'a new set of European ideological and diplomatic alliances' that anticipated Spain's truce with the United Provinces (p. 311). Its non-confessional anti-papal nature would allow an alliance with both Venice, then quarrelling with the pope, and Henry IV of France. James's continuing outpouring of words against the papacy, moreover, acted as 'a substitute' for a military commitment to pan-European Protestantism. Third, and less controversially, Questier maintains that the flight of the earls of Tyrone and Tyrconnell from Ireland, the earl's welcoming reception at Rome, and the papacy's hard line on the oath of allegiance 'could all be taken as in some sense connected' (p. 316).

The final sections of chapter 5 attempt to cover an ambitious range of issues. Over a mere thirteen pages, Questier relates the 1609 truce of Antwerp, which temporarily ended fighting in the Netherlands, the Jülich-Cleves dispute, the 1610 parliament and the Great Contract, George Abbot's nomination as archbishop of Canterbury, and James's ideological intervention in the controversy over Arminianism in the United Provinces. This reader was left with a sense of some unanswered questions. Take Jülich-Cleves: we learn that in October 1609 James ruled out direct military action over the dispute, but not why. In January 1610, Questier writes, James 'evidently wanted to avoid being upstaged' by Henry IV and so decided to commit a limited number of troops to the German Protestant Union, although the thrust of his policy was to persuade the French 'to stay in the front-line' (p. 325). The reader is left wondering what Questier thinks lay behind James's foreign policy: did the king hold an ideological commitment to peace? Was he simply opposed to spending his limited financial resources on war? Was he alarmed about Habsburg power, or was the retention of the Spanish alliance crucial to him? Was he thinking seriously about his public image as a Protestant king?

The overall theme of Chapter 6 (1611-1620) is the breakdown of James's *via media* politics. As before, Questier takes us through the interrelationship of foreign and domestic affairs and policies. His starting point here is the shift in James's foreign policy that arose from Henry IV's assassination in 1610. It was the weakness of the French regency government and the proposal for a double Franco-Spanish dynastic treaty that compelled James to look to a Protestant alliance and work for a marriage between his daughter and the Elector Palatine. Inevitably the internal politics of Britain were affected. James was now 'more or less on the same page as his Hispanophobe councillors',

notably Abbot (p. 338). He was also ready to take a 'visibly harder line towards prominent Catholic dissenters', though not only for that reason (p. 339). The extended use of the oath of allegiance during the summer of 1612, proposes Questier, was possibly 'in part intended to flush out Catholic opposition to the imminent Palatine match' (p. 339). Nonetheless, James did not yet pull back totally from his previous *via media* position: 'as so often in James's weird and wonderful middle-way world' (p. 339), he sent out contrary signals, this time by arranging for the removal of his mother's remains from Peterborough Cathedral to be reburied in Westminster Abbey (p. 339). Unsurprisingly, however, this move, if it was indeed made for this purpose, failed to diminish Catholic hostility to the match and to the subsequent treaty with the German Protestants and Dutch in 1613.

Drawing upon John McCavitt and Aidan Clarke's work, Questier then relates how James's new confessional direction had repercussions in Ireland. Partly to deal with the national security issues that might arise from Habsburg interventions after the Protestant alliances, he called a parliament to meet there in 1613. In response, the Catholic palesmen protested that national security could best be served by the grant of toleration to loyalists, and James seemed to be listening to them. At the very least, writes Questier, James 'was still resorting, here and there, to the public language of unity and irenicism' (p. 351). Nonetheless, on 20 April 1614, he delivered a speech before an Irish Catholic delegation that 'let rip' about the danger to his regality from Irish Catholic MPs. Its timing - two weeks into the session of the 'Addled Parliament'- convinces Questier that James wanted to give the impression to English MPs that he was not on the side of Irish malcontents. Three months after the Addled Parliament had 'crashed and burned', James changed his attitude towards the Irish and delivered a conciliatory lecture to the same Catholic delegation. The loyalist speech of the Irish Catholic spokesman on that occasion, Questier hints, made a telling contrast to the 'too bold' language of puritan MPs in the 1614 parliament.

James did not abandon his '*via media* style' of politics with the Palatine marriage but, on the contrary, kept his foreign policy options open. The result was the well-known fracture at court that led to the Overbury scandal. Less appreciated by historians, adds Questier, was that the assault on the Howards amounted to an attack on 'precisely the kind of Catholic constituency' that openly subscribed to the kind of political allegiance constructed by the king and whose support James could ill afford to lose. Nonetheless, James was veering towards a Catholic marriage for his son Charles, and by 1616 observers deduced it would be with Spain. The resultant concern of godly Protestants, claims Questier, could be seen during James's journey to Scotland in 1617, while the trip itself with its 'full-frontal assault' on the Kirk

‘was at least partly designed for European observers’ and with the negotiation of a dynastic treaty with Spain in mind.

As 1617 gave way to 1618, states Questier, ‘the path of royal policy could not easily be described as a uniformly Protestant one’ (p. 381). That is putting it mildly! As Questier himself remarks, in 1618 James actively pursued a Spanish dynastic alliance and agreed to the execution of Raleigh, demanded by Madrid. Additionally, not only was the British delegation’s participation ‘minimal’ at the synod of Dort but also it was instructed to keep quiet about any political union between Europe’s Protestants. It was of course the Bohemian revolt that finally tipped the scales in favour of the Spanish alliance, since it would allow James to bargain on behalf of his son-in-law Frederick V if his hereditary lands were invaded and seized. Once this happened in 1621, however, James was drawn into negotiating for their return and security, a decision which Questier thinks was arguably ‘the only serious political mistake he ever made in the sense that he was finally forced into taking sides and, on some accounts, the wrong side’ (p. 395).

In Chapter 7 (1621-1629), Questier seeks to show that the 1620s saw ‘a failure of parliaments as the crown’s dynastic strategy eventually took precedence over the concerns of, especially, Protestant-minded representatives of the people’ (Abstract for Chapter 7, Oxford Scholarship online). The key word here for me is ‘eventually’. In the 1621 parliament, James was surely on the backfoot when confronting the furious anti-Catholic and anti-Spanish sentiment that hampered his negotiations with Spain. This sentiment was based on a real and justifiable fear. As Questier declares: ‘astute contemporaries would have been aware how far English Catholics had inserted themselves into the processes by which the Stuart court was trying to construct its dynastic future’ (p. 401). MPs, therefore, demanded harsher recusancy laws which were incompatible with Spain’s demands for concrete evidence that James would move towards toleration for Catholics. By the end of November 1621, moreover, James found the pressure for his involvement in the war was mounting. His attempts to stop the fighting had come to nothing and the French could not intervene against Spain, even had they wanted to, as Louis XIII had taken up arms against the Huguenots. As a result, James agreed to send troops to defend the Palatinate, but he still insisted that the marriage negotiations with Spain should continue in tandem. When the Commons delivered a petition against the marriage and demanded the enforcement of laws against Catholic separatism, James dissolved parliament and then pushed even harder for the match.

Godly Protestants now had real cause to worry. Avant-garde conformist attitudes moved from the periphery to the centre, as the regime tried to construct a coalition in support of its foreign policy. More alarming, in August 1622, James ordered the suspension of the



operation of the penal laws against recusants. Abroad, Protestants were dismayed by the crushing of Huguenot independence in France and the fall of Heidelberg in the Palatinate. No wonder that in these circumstances, Catholics spoke out openly in support of the Stuart monarchy, another cause of Protestant anxiety.

Questier does not view the journey to Madrid as a farce and dismisses the later claims made by Charles and Buckingham that the Spaniards had intended to dupe them as polemically constructed. Like Brennan Pursell, he believes that the Spanish court was negotiating 'at least partly in good faith' and the match was not doomed from the start. Questier then tells us the repercussions of the match's failure: it did not lead to war against Spain, as many Protestants wanted, but to an Anglo-French dynastic marriage project. James hoped this would result in Louis XIII's assistance in the recovery of the Palatinate, so that Britain would not be obliged to go to war. Despite this attempt at a dynastic solution, James had little choice, when a new parliament was called, but to follow the anti-Spanish line of his son and Buckingham. He also acceded to the request for a proclamation against Catholics and to the purge of the privy councillors who had supported the Spanish match. Yet in the contrary direction, the Anglo-French treaty was signed in September 1624 which gave Catholic concessions that the Stuart court had no intention of keeping.

After James's death, Questier argues, there were 'successive and shattering crises that resembled the worst misadventures of the Elizabethan era' (p. 420). Why was this? Conrad Russell argued that easily avoidable miscalculations caused the problems, but Questier is at pains to state that Charles and Buckingham's decisions were usually logical. As a major cause of the early problems, Questier points to the 'incoherence' in the Anglo-French marriage: hostility to the conduct of the government in parliament, he states, 'was glossed continually by reference also to the alleged dysfunctions of the marriage alliance' (p. 423). Furthermore, there was a 'public sense' that the new French queen 'was shifting the centre of gravity' at the court. The result was renewed anti-Catholic activity. Additionally, according to Questier, the problems of the French match lay behind Buckingham's diplomacy and the high-risk strategy of the Cadiz expedition. Unfortunately, he does not take us through his thinking here in detail: this would have been useful as this view does not accord with recent historiography, including for example the work of Anton Poot.<sup>5</sup> But Questier is right in claiming that the treaty of Monzon was France's 'definitive denial' of what the English court took to be their obligations in the marriage alliance.

<sup>5</sup> Anton Poot, *Crucial Years in Anglo-Dutch Relations, 1625-1642: The Political and Diplomatic Contacts* (Hilversum: Verloren Press, 2013).

Buckingham's diplomatic and military failures left him exposed in parliament, where he was also subject to anti-popish accusations. Hostility to him increased afterwards when he was held responsible for concessions made to Catholics in 1627, concerning the compounding of fines. Their function was to raise money for the king, as was the forced loan. The forced loan also had a confessional tinge as Catholics and Arminians were involved in its collection. Puritan 'political dominoes' fell one by one at this point: Abbot was suspended; Laud and Neile became privy councillors. Yet at the same time Charles gave help to the Huguenots in order to recover the approbation of the anti-Spanish coalition of 1624. Questier is kinder to Buckingham and the disaster of the Isle of Rhé expedition than most other historians, much kinder than he was to Elizabeth's military failures.

The 1628 Parliament followed the same pattern of parliamentary protest as had the previous four. Questier challenges the assumption in most historical accounts that the subsequent chaos and recrimination was largely Charles's fault. He implies, instead, that the responsibility lay with MPs, who believing in and constructing the discourse of a popish plot, provoked Charles beyond reason: Charles was criticised as the tool of Buckingham and for failing to listen to counsel from parliament. Nevertheless, despite these provocations, both king and favourite showed a sensitivity to public opinion during the session's prorogation. Charles sent out tougher orders for the execution of laws against popery, while Buckingham relinquished some of his offices, made overtures to those who had condemned Arminianism, and planned another expedition to help the Huguenots. Buckingham's assassination, claims Questier, 'stripped out the crucial figure who had proved that he could in some limited sense deliver on the king's promises to assist the forces of European Protestantism' (p. 450).

The ensuing failure of the La Rochelle campaign, the uproar in the 1629 parliament, and the queen's rapprochement with Charles after Buckingham's death, all 'made things radically worse' for Charles's critics. They also resulted in the king and 'his new management team' setting a new ideological agenda, which was 'arguably more realistic' than that of his MP critics. In 1629 Charles signed a peace with France and in 1630 with Spain. Questier makes it clear that he disagrees with negative assessments of the king; in 1629 he had 'read the political tea-leaves correctly' (p. 457).

Professor Questier is a leading historian of early-modern Catholics, and his books and articles have long been essential reading. *Dynastic Politics* is therefore disappointing. Unlike his other works, it reveals little that is new, no doubt because Questier relies heavily on calendars and printed sources. As a narrative, it is a demanding and unexciting read, only occasionally enlivened by dry comments, whether related to

his dislike of the Elizabethan regime or hatred of higher education practices. For Questier at his best, readers should turn instead to his *Catholicism and Community in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), an innovative and elegantly written book which also demonstrates that Catholics were not irrelevant outsiders.