



*Dynastic Politics and the British
Reformations, 1558-1630*

Michael Questier

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Dynastic Politics and the British Reformations, 1558–1630. By Michael Questier. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. ISBN 978-0-19-882633-0. xv + 499 pp. £35.00.

Adding to his impressive body of work on the history of Catholicism in early modern England, Michael Questier's latest book, *Dynastic Politics and the British Reformations, 1558–1630*, aims "to recover as far as possible, something of the broader culture of dynastic politics between, on the one hand, the arguably dysfunctional Elizabethan settlement of the late 1550s and, on the other, the early 1630s, that is, the point at which many of the long-running and deeply divisive questions raised by Tudor succession problems might have been regarded as settled" (3). More specifically, the book focuses on how Catholics responded to such developments, as Questier believes that "there are reasonable grounds for reintroducing and reintegrating into the 'mainstream' what one might confidently call Catholic voices and, indeed, Catholic narratives and analyses of the exercise of royal authority during this period" (4–5). He argues that this material has been neglected because it "has been assumed to be of no relevance for answering the larger questions of post-Reformation English and British history," particularly concerning the relationships between the three kingdoms within the British Isles and their relationships with continental Europe (9).

To write a narrative of events from the Catholic perspective, Questier relies on the published state papers from Catholic states: France, Spain, and Venice. Other important sources include pamphlets and treatises by Catholic authors, published letter collections, and internal state papers concerning England, Ireland, and Scotland. As Questier makes clear, his narrative focuses on what is commonly called "high politics," telling the story of the elites who were able to influence governmental policies rather than "common" Catholic subjects. Questier does not engage with a great deal of secondary material, which is unfortunate given that numerous scholars, such as Jemma Field, Paulina Kewes, and Catriona Murray, have been working on the dynastic politics of this period.

Questier has done a great deal of work to create this comprehensive volume, full of quotes from the primary sources mentioned above. The extent of the quotations can make the text feel dense, especially for someone not already familiar with the people and events being described. As a result, I would recommend this book to readers who already have a working knowledge of the period and are looking to broaden their understanding by reading about it from a Catholic perspective. Perhaps Questier could have pointed out more frequently when the interpretation of events put forward by

his Catholic commentators was unreliable or incorrect, thus making even clearer how their Catholicism coloured their understanding. The State Papers are notoriously unreliable because ambassadors were rarely made privy to government decision-making, nor did they necessarily understand the nuances of the political and religious systems on which they were commenting.

Questier injects humorous comments to provide light relief. For instance, he refers to a memorandum reminding a “presumably forgetful” Elizabeth I of reasons not to support the exiled Mary, Queen of Scots (86), and the French ambassador being told “what he could do with his embassy” when he tried to prevent Mary’s execution (169). However, there are also some terms that should have been left out: for example, referring to Spanish policy as “schizophrenic” (84) and Questier’s re-writing of the directly quoted contemporary term “whoredom” as “slut of the universe” (91) are problematic. References to “Blairite meaninglessness” (265) and “a kind of Max Clifford figure” (389) date the work unnecessarily and are only going to confuse scholars who do not remember or did not live through these fairly recent (for the time being) events, not to mention readers outside the United Kingdom.

While there are frequent and informed excursions to other parts of western Europe and the British Isles, the narrative primarily focuses on events in London, the home of England’s political and religious authorities. My own specialism is Scottish history, so I will focus on those sections. Questier’s approach to Scottish history is infused with the hindsight knowledge that the Stuart claim would prevail in the battle to succeed the Tudors on the English throne. There is little analysis of the other contenders, even those with Catholic connections: for example, various Catholics suggested that Arbella Stuart might be married to a Catholic prince and made Queen of England. Despite his focus on Britain’s dynastic politics, Questier does not discuss the fact that if either Mary, Queen of Scots, or James VI had died childless, it was not agreed who would succeed them on the Scottish throne. While Questier’s analysis of James VI’s attitude towards Catholicism within Scotland before 1603 is detailed and engaging, James’s move to London in 1603 results in a near silence concerning Scotland—something that is common in accounts of James’s life.

Questier makes claims that I disagree with. For example, Questier argues that at the end of the 1560s, Mary, Queen of Scots, “though deprived of her Scottish crown, had moved several steps, both politically and geographically, closer to Elizabeth’s” (88). Mary was an isolated prisoner who lacked the resources of a reigning queen. Because of that powerlessness, she was no longer able to guarantee engagement or even politeness when she wrote to Elizabeth about the English succession, and her cause became the

preserve of fanatics and outsiders. Going against the received narrative that Elizabeth's position was secured by Mary's execution, Questier instead claims that "between her [Mary] and her son, the house of Stuart had already, in effect, displaced its Tudor rival" (171). In 1587, James VI was childless and the last representative of his dynastic line, just like Elizabeth—it is only with hindsight that we know he would go on to have children, outlive Elizabeth, and secure the English throne.

It is a missed opportunity that Questier does not comment on Anna of Denmark and Elizabeth of Bohemia providing potential heirs to the English, Irish and Scottish thrones, as the celebrations around these occasions reflected the dynastic and religious ambitions of their parents. Questier also does not discuss the possibility that Anna of Denmark was herself a Catholic: even if we cannot decisively conclude that she was, foreign ambassadors took a keen interest in the possibility and believed that it was significant. As Jemma Field has concluded in her 2019 article in *Northern History*: "Anna, together with James, privately professed or qualified rumours of her Catholicism to a select few Catholics both locally and abroad as a matter of political expediency." Given that Anna's confessional identity and its ramifications so clearly tie into the book's themes, I was surprised it was not discussed.

This book offers a nuanced take on the place of religion in the world of political history, recognising that there was no single "Catholic" political position in this period, but rather a variety of views that changed in response to political developments. Questier analyses how different religious groups conceived of crown authority, challenging the notion that Catholicism was always a threat to the sovereign by pointing out that it often Protestants who proposed forms of resistance theory. I would certainly recommend this book to readers who want to read about the lesser-known Catholic perspective on well-known events in Elizabethan and Jacobean history.

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