



Charles I

Mark Parry

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Review by: Amy Saunders



Charles I. By Mark Parry. New York: Routledge, 2020. ISBN 978-1-138-71222-5. 274 pp. £34.99.

Mark Parry's *Charles I* offers a valuable contribution to the Routledge Historical Biographies Series, examining the life, character, and actions of the only monarch in English history to have been executed at the hands of his own subjects. As Parry notes, "King Charles I looms large in the British historical imagination" (1). Charles I is present in an equestrian statue in one of the most iconic London squares, has been portrayed on screen by Alec Guinness and Rupert Everett, and was the subject of the Royal Academy of Art's anniversary exhibition "Charles I: King and Collector" (2018). In this sense, the events of the seventeenth century and the actions and interests of Charles I continue to inform artistic and political discourse within Britain, and to inspire representations in popular culture.

Parry begins with a discussion of the key theories and works surrounding Charles I, highlighting the different historiographical camps and where disagreement takes place between and within these groups. He firmly places Charles's character in context, analysing his childhood, the rise of the Villiers family—most notably George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham—Charles's relations with Parliament while still Prince of Wales, and the Spanish Match (including his trip to Madrid). With regards to this latter event, Parry views it as "one of the most mysterious and puzzling episodes" (28) in relation to Charles's character. While undoubtedly unusual, it is perhaps not as strange as it might appear at first glance, especially when we consider that James VI & I, Charles's father, also travelled to the European continent in his youth as part of his own marriage alliance.

Parry's discussion is largely political and, due to it being chronological, the narrative drives towards the Civil Wars and Charles's eventual execution. However, the narrative does not stop there. Parry's penultimate chapter offers a glimpse at Charles's reputation after his death and examines Charles's attempts to shape his own posthumous image while still alive. The beginning of Parry's work briefly explores Charles's modern image, and the penultimate chapter, therefore, draws the introduction and conclusion together. Throughout his discussion, Parry highlights Charles I's concern with his own conscience and honour, which acts as a clearly distinguishable thread throughout the narrative. Parry also draws attention to a number of contradictions within Charles's nature, but, on occasion, the largely political and religious focus of the work causes him to under-analyse some of these contradictions. For example, in the section "Conscientious objector," Parry briefly mentions Charles's potential sexual relationship with Royalist Jane

Whorwood. Though Parry recognises that this conflicts with Charles's reputation as a faithful family man, he uses it to briefly "convey the human side of the King's captivity" (220) rather than to analyse fully what this might say about Charles' character and how this may have affected Charles and Henrietta Maria's united image.

Parry offers a fair discussion throughout, weighing up arguments previously made by other scholars and examining the level to which they stand up when situated beside other arguments and evidence. Throughout, Parry includes excerpts of original documents and, within his references, directs readers towards easily accessible copies of these to supplement their own reading. The book ends with a guide to further reading, which directs readers to additional primary sources, many of them easily accessible, and to a range of secondary material. One criticism is that this suggested secondary material could have been expanded, specifically in terms of highlighting further reading regarding other prominent figures within Parry's narrative. Henrietta Maria, for example, features regularly within the book, but academic works examining the queen and exploring her actions during the Civil War—for example, Michelle Anne White's *Henrietta Maria and the English Civil Wars* (2006)—are not included. Furthermore, at points, perhaps for reasons of succinctness and restrictions of length, Parry does not highlight those who significantly contributed to certain aspects of scholarship by name. Parry's assessment of Charles is clear, readable, and succinct, and does as the series intends: provides an accessible introduction to his subject while thoroughly discussing and evaluating the historiography that has come before. Despite presenting his own conclusions, Parry does not write in a way that fully discredits, disregards, or devalues any of the opinions that he includes within the narrative. This possibly comes from Parry having previously co-authored an A-Level textbook, *Stuart Britain and the Crisis of Monarchy, 1603-1702* (2015), and a desire to allow readers to come to their own conclusions based on the evidence laid out before them.

Parry's Conclusion once again highlights Charles's beliefs in relation to honour and conscience and seeks to emphasise some of the continuities between the reigns of James VI & I and Charles, which are often discussed in terms of their differences. The Conclusion uses the context and events explored within the main body of the text to not only recognise the challenges that Charles faced during his kingship, but also to suggest that these events led to a breakdown of trust between the King and Parliament, ultimately leading to the Civil Wars and Charles's execution. In the Conclusion, Parry draws attention to one final overarching contradiction: Charles was attracted to medieval chivalric ideas and based his financial policies in medieval

precedents, while at the same time adhering to contemporary ideas of the Renaissance state and having an admiration of the visual arts.

Parry's work is potentially most useful in terms of its concise nature and clear discussion of the differing historical debates surrounding Charles and the Civil War. This makes it a valuable read for students and researchers, as well as an accessible introduction for general readers looking for a clear political and religious overview of the life and reign of Charles I. Parry provides clear signposting throughout the book and the themes and ideas introduced at the start of the narrative are all returned to and discussed. In summary, while there are aspects that could potentially benefit from expansion, Parry's work offers a successful and concise overview of the life of Charles I. Parry's clear historiographical discussions, signposting, and his emphasis on the contradictions in Charles's character offer a readable and thorough background for any reader.

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