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A Monarchy Transformed: Britain, 1603-1714



Synopsis

The seventeenth century, writes Mark Kishlansky, was a wheel of transformation in perpetual motion, a period of political and religious upheaval that defined the nation for decades to come and remains critical for understanding the nation today. Beginning with the accession of James I and concluding with the death of Queen Anne, this compelling account describes the tempestuous events that took place during the Stuart dynasty and provides lively pen portraits of the many fascinating personalities involved. Conspiracies, rebellions, and revolutions jostle side by side with court intrigues, political infighting and the rise of parties. In 1603 Britain was an isolated archipelago; by 1714 it had emerged among the intellectual, commercial, and military centers of the world. Kishlansky's century saw one king executed, another exiled, the House of Lords abolished, and the Church of England reconstructed along Presbyterian lines . . . A masterly narrative, shot through with the shrewdness that comes from profound scholarship. "Jonathan Clark, *Spectator* "A historian with a real love for the period, a real understanding of many different aspects of it, and an exhilarating style." Ronald Hutton, *The Times Literary Supplement* "This sweeping, dramatic chronicle of a century of Stuart rule will rivet even the general reader with no particular interest in British history." Publishers Weekly

Book Information

Paperback: 400 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books; 6 edition (December 1, 1997)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0140148272

ISBN-13: 978-0140148275

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.9 x 7.7 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 23 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #80,255 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #88 in Books > History > Europe > Great Britain > England #166 in Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Political Science > Political History #181 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > International & World Politics > European

Customer Reviews

A beautifully written but narrowly focused narrative of high politics in 17th-century Britain. Kishlansky (English and European History/Harvard) recognizes that history is a story and that a good historian

is a storyteller. His strongly delineated point of view contributes to the flow of the narrative, and his enthusiasm for the subject sustains the reader through thickets of detail about high politics and war. Viewing 17th-century Britain through the eyes of those at the top, Kishlansky always comes down on the side of political stability. He successfully avoids uncritical power worship with judicious criticism of both the Stuart monarchs and of Cromwell. However, as a volume in the new Penguin History of Britain (see also Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-1990*, p. 186), *A Monarchy Transformed* is intended to provide a definitive introductory guide for the student and general reader. Although every historian must leave things out of the story, too many important things are neglected in this one. Kishlansky mentions in passing such important matters as Britain's overseas empire, the slave trade, art and literature, science and mathematics, but doesn't weave such materials into his narrative. John Donne is identified merely as a recipient of royal patronage, and John Milton dismissed as an "ideologue." The momentous religious changes of the period are discussed mainly when they influence politics or threaten social stability. What is most disappointing, though, is the treatment of women. Queen Mary is mentioned and Queen Anne gets a chapter, but beyond that women appear at the margins of history, as irrational teenage royal brides or midwives accused of kidnapping children for satanic rituals. Women should not be marginalized in any volume that aspires to the status of a general survey. Although successful as a forceful narrative of politics at the center, this volume is a disappointing general introduction to 17th-century British history. -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

If some interpretations or facts are open to question, the larger narrative seems balanced and reasonable.... Also, much must be forgiven a historian who writes of the egregious Titus Oates that he "was eventually hoist on his own canard," and of Queen Anne that her pleasures were "limited to gambling and dining, losing pounds at one set of tables and gaining them at another." -- The New York Times Book Review, Paul S. Seaver --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is what I would call a traditional narrative political history, a throwback in style to the grand, magisterial treatments of generations past, where the author provides his judicious summary of circumstances and personalities in carefully cadenced sentences, organized sequentially by a schoolboy's outline of events with salient dates. I read it quickly, while sick in bed. It was an easy, absorbing read, full of phrases, like this, part of a description Queen Anne: Anne was dull, taciturn,

stubborn and unattractive. Her conversation was mind-numbing, her taste insipid, her pleasures limited to gambling and dining, losing pounds at one set of tables and gaining them at the other. The accumulated scholarship of the last century, concerning social movements, economics and ideology, is allowed to seep in a bit around the edges, after a broadbrush survey that serves as a prefatory chapter, but the political doings of kings and ministers and generals are the main event, and the historian's well-phrased judgment the main service. The book covers a period of 111 years -- the long Stuart century, from the accession of James I to the death of Queen Anne -- that works out to around 3 pages of narrative per year, and many are eventful, literally revolutionary years in the emergence of modern Britain. There's a bibliography, but no footnotes, and the author seems keen to shy away from scholarly controversy, but equally keen to exercise the historian's traditional prerogative to pronounce sweeping judgments in a style now obsolete, but still delightful to appreciate. The result can be intensely enjoyable, but not necessarily deeply informative reading. If you already have some acquaintance with the events, personalities or conflicts, Kishlansky's pronouncements may be appreciated as elegant distillations or delightfully pithy rhetoric. If you do not have some passing acquaintance with the period and some of its players, this may be history as one damn earl after another, as the analysis is rendered implicit by this style of narrative punctuated by summary judgment, with much of the supportive detail for these sweeping judgments unexamined. It is not a partisan treatment, at least in modern terms. The narrative is informed by the so-called three kingdoms approach, which attributes some of the dynamic instability to the problems of managing Ireland and Scotland, but the focus is England, and while there's a side-long glance at popular passions and economic conditions from time to time, this narrative remains focused on elite ambitions and disputes. There's no hashing out of historiographical controversies, no tendentious pressing of revisionist theses, but also little acknowledgment that these have occurred, and consequently little attempt to argue out an explicit "deeper" analysis. There is an implicit narrative analysis -- of the challenges posed by religious controversy, the inadequacies of state finance, competition in the evolving European state system and political management of a decentralized polity -- threads that run thru the Stuart century. The narrative seems reasonable, the considered judgment of an historian of long acquaintance, deep knowledge, but professional detachment. There's not a lot of open puzzlement on display. Though the author does express astonishment at the accomplishments of the 17th century, the strangeness is not always as apparent.

Kishlansky has been known as somewhat of a revisionist (and intellectual provocateur) already, but an overview from a somewhat distinct viewpoint from a notable historian, especially a well-written

one, is quite welcome and needed. I teach Western Civilization at the community college level, and have taught a unit on Stuart England for 15 years, and yet this book gave me many new insights. I have only two further comments. First, the author paints a picture of 17th century England and the challenges facing its leaders in such a way that it puts the Stuart kings (to some degree) in a much more favorable light than I have ever thought of them before. I don't mean to say that Kishlansky is overly indulgent in this sense, or that he in any way ignores the many bad decisions (think Treaty of Dover) and character flaws. However, he not only points out, quite accurately, positive elements to their leadership (this I was already acquainted with), but that some of their decisions and actions (which include their advisors), made perfect sense given the reality and context of the times, even if they don't make sense by our standards today. For instance, on many occasions when one or another Stuart monarch prorogued or dissolved Parliament, actions that in a modern democratic mode of thinking, we almost reflexively see as unjust, the alternatives facing them were often no better or worse. Parliament at times, appeared in no shape to offer leadership that was any better, and seems to have at times been making governance unnecessarily obtuse, inconsistent, and combative. Also, the outdated fiscal policy, which forced the Stuarts (the accepted and expected practice) to pay their own way for the most part, and more importantly, the out-of-control, roiling, complex conflict between Anglicans, Calvinist/Puritans, and Catholics put the Stuarts in incredibly difficult positions. I now feel compelled to ask my students, at least when we get to certain points in the Stuart period, did the monarchy really have a choice? and/or could the monarchy have really solved this or that problem? and would Parliament have made the situation better when left out by the Stuarts and their various administrations? I think Kishlansky did a tremendous job illustrating the highly complicated issues the Stuarts were forced to confront. It helped that he started the book with a section on English society during the period -- everyday life, social structure, economy, land tenure, etc. The reader then better understands the underlying context of the political decision-making process. Second, Kishlansky displays an understanding of style (i.e. writing in a way that peaks curiosity and raises interest), by starting each chapter with a short dramatic (but true) narrative episode in 17th century history (many of them are famous, like the Gunpowder Plot), and using that short vignette to not only cause the reader to want to know more, but through the course of the chapter, without doing so explicitly, makes it abundantly clear how the episode relates to and is symbolic or perfectly in step with the era in which it happened. All in all, this is a fantastic book for an overview. I think it could have value for students, general interest readers, and even academics. Many such broad surveys lack this depth of scholarship and understanding, original thought, and lively prose on display here. Not Kishlansky's! With that I will "Say No More"! :)

Very thorough but a bit unwelcoming. Especially the author's vocabulary. Very often I had to consult the glossary and/or dictionary, and typically the word I had to search would be a term used in the 17th century which subsequently went out of usage. Who he is he trying to impress? Why not write in normal modern English? (Parenthetically I have a doctorate from a major university so I can cope with complex vocabulary. But I don't write using the vocabulary of my specialization -- 19th century Russian --and I recommend he uses 21st century English.)

My goal in reading this book was to understand what the founders of the U.S. learned about when they were studying history as students. It was readable and not overly detailed. Understanding British history and the evolution of the monarchy and representative government makes the philosophical differences between Federalists and Republicans fit into the flow of history. This idea was endorsed in Jon Meacham's recent biography Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power with regard to Jefferson's thinking and actions. I have found this read to be very helpful in my understanding of the development of the constitution and bill of rights.

Starting in the reign of Charles the I through to the introduction of the Hanoverians, A Monarchy Transformed presents the most turbulent times in British history since the Wars of the Roses. Unlike many of the "Whig" histories of the era, it presents a well-balanced approach to the times. I found this to be extremely well-written and very readable history. My only disappointments are that Mark Kishlansky hasn't written more, and that there isn't a comparable history of the reign of the first two Georges.

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