

BOOK REVIEWS

Kevin Sharpe, *Image Wars: Promoting Kings and Commonwealths in England, 1603-1660* (Yale University Press, May 2010), xvii + 665pp. £35.

Reviewed by Dr Andrew Barclay

Never known for concision, Kevin Sharpe has produced another doorstop of a book. What was originally conceived of as a single volume on the images of early-modern English and British monarchs has expanded into a vast trilogy, of which this substantial book is the second instalment. As usual, brevity is not a virtue associated with the practice of close reading. Not that Sharpe is ever less than interesting. The big themes of the first two volumes have been how England's rulers adapted to the new opportunities and challenges of print and portraiture. Potential readers may, however, be relieved to know that each volume is intended to stand alone; so those interested only in the early Stuarts and the Cromwells should not feel obligated to read his equally extensive discussion about the Tudors contained in the first volume. Sharpe cannot be accused of lacking ambition. The amount of material discussed is vast and he attempts to discuss royal imagery in all media, printed and visual. He is especially good on the visual forms of printed text, such as the nuances of typography. Such scope brings its own problems. One rarely feels that Sharpe is providing the definitive treatment of any particular point. But then he probably considers that he is doing no more than having his say in debates that remain as fluid and provisional as they were in the seventeenth century. And whatever else they will do, these books will certainly provoke much further discussion.

Three men dominate this second volume - James I, Charles I and Oliver Cromwell. Sharpe adopts the novel approach of taking all three with equal seriousness. The recurring drawback is that this tends to mean taking them at their own estimation, even if this is always contrasted with some discussion of the views of their critics. This does pay some dividends. Perhaps the most important sections of the book are those on Charles I's wartime declarations. Sharpe shows that Charles (or at least his ghostwriters) finally found his voice during the 1640s, becoming more voluble in print than even his father had been. He also becomes a more martial figure in a culture that still expected its rulers to be warriors. Far more contentious will be Sharpe's view that, despite the decisive result on the battlefield, the royalists never really lost the intellectual argument in print.

BOOK REVIEWS

About one-eighth of the text (four chapters) is devoted to the Cromwellian protectorate, a fair enough proportion in a book covering 1603 to 1660. The basic theme of that section is a reiteration of Sharpe's view that English culture in the 1650s remained inherently monarchist and that this is only underlined by the fact that in Cromwell some found a substitute king. That Cromwell's rule became more monarchical as the decade progressed is not exactly in dispute. What Sharpe does do is to introduce a note of paradox. The more majestic Cromwell was adeptly responding to the national mood, and yet he could never be quite the real thing. Sharpe makes the astute point that royalist satirists had, for polemical effect, created the image of Cromwell as 'the man who would be king' long before this became even vaguely plausible. The joke only later became a reality and for many it never lost that element of absurdity. Nor was it as if he could make monarchy work much better than either of the Stuarts. A case in point would be Cromwell's speeches to the protectoral parliaments, which are considered by Sharpe in some detail. As he has already devoted much attention to those by James I and Charles I, obvious similarities emerge. What this then underlines is that, however skilful his oratory (to which Sharpe gives due praise), Cromwell was no more successful than his Stuart predecessors in winning over his parliaments. Sharpe also sees his public declarations as lord protector as ultimately ineffectual. He nevertheless concludes that Cromwell was 'very much his own best spokesman' (p. 482). But was he his own worst enemy also?

The discussion of the Cromwellian portraiture is more problematic. Previous scholars, such as David Piper, John Cooper and Laura Knoppers, have already thoroughly tilled that particular field. Sharpe's own take on the subject sometimes feels strained. He wants to believe that Cromwell's visual image was created in the early 1650s to fulfil the longing for a 'single person' that the republic had failed to satisfy. But are not the 'regal' features of those images just a recycling of the imagery which had been used for the previous lord generals, Essex and Fairfax? Does not Knoppers still have a point about how unregal most of the later portraits look? As Sharpe himself has to acknowledge, there were other, much more obvious ways than his portraits in which Cromwell was becoming more like a king, so the puzzle of this discrepancy remains.

One might, with more than a touch of mischief, suggest that the hero of this volume is Charles I. But mostly as a plaster saint. Being executed was the

BOOK REVIEWS

best possible career move and, as king-martyr, Charles was transfigured into an icon as unassailable as it was unreal. In death, he finally became as successful as Elizabeth I had been in life. Sharpe is doubtless correct to argue that this played its part in the ultimate failure of the republic and that, in this respect, image was indeed at least as important as any reality; which, it must be said, is a very twenty-first-century conclusion.

Dr Andrew Barclay is a Senior Research Fellow in the 1640-60 section of the History of Parliament Trust, London.

Christopher Marsh, *Music and Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0-521-89832-4) Hardback. xiii + 609pp and audio CD, £65.

Reviewed by Dr Patrick Little

Oliver Cromwell is well known for his love of music. On 3 September 1650, before his victorious troops pursued the defeated Scots at Dunbar, he halted them to sing Psalm 117. As protector he retained skilled musicians at his court, and the marriages of his younger daughters in 1657 were marked with music and dancing. Cromwell's delight in music was not eccentric – it placed him in the cultural mainstream of early modern England, as this splendid new book by Christopher Marsh, reader in history at Queen's University, Belfast, demonstrates.

Dr Marsh's starting point is that our relationship with music is completely different from that of our ancestors, as much of what we encounter is recorded, involuntary (as in shops and lifts), or listened to privately. Above all, ours is primarily a visual culture, and in many respects we lack the aural awareness of people four hundred years ago. The challenge is to recover that lost sound world, and Marsh does so brilliantly, looking in turn at the power of music over listeners (including the 'rough music' performed to humiliate those who challenged the social norms); the role of occupational musicians (including town waits), amateurs and 'recreational musicians'; the importance of ballads and how they were sung; formal and informal dancing; and the music of the parish churches (including metrical psalms and bell-ringing). The accompanying CD provides specially recorded

BOOK REVIEWS

examples which reinforce the argument wonderfully well. The inclusion of a CD is entirely appropriate for another reason, as the focus of the book is very much on music as it was heard, rather than as it was read on a page, and Marsh pays more attention to what might be called 'low culture' than to the elite music of the cathedrals or the court. Not that the two worlds were separate, for many choirmen were part timers, some supplementing their incomes by singing in alehouses; and 'country dances' were all the rage at the restoration court. Indeed, he argues that musicians 'mediated between "high" and "low" society more extensively and continuously than any other group' (p. 163).

At every turn, Dr Marsh encourages us to see the early modern world in its own terms, as a living society. When it comes to broadside ballads – the enormously popular romantic, political or obscene ditties sold at street corners – the emphasis is on how they were performed and heard. These were songs, not poetry, and can only be understood as such; and we are told, pointedly, that 'the silent scholar, sitting alone in the library, inhabits another world' (p. 233). The tunes are a vital part of interpreting these ballads, as they had their own meanings and associations that could add to, or subvert, the words. Nor was what was termed 'country dancing' the pastime of a few oddballs; it was 'a national passion', (p. 330) which could support or challenge the social hierarchy, even leading to disorder and violence. Church music did not retreat into the cathedrals and chapels royal during this period, it was still alive in the parishes, where bell ringing became very popular, and the singing of metrical psalms in unison was an essential, and much-loved, part of ordinary services. As Marsh puts it, 'the experience of singing in a crowd can be an overwhelming one, particularly when the atmosphere is charged with a sense of the sacred' (p. 440). Psalm-singing spilled over into everyday life. Popular ones were sung by artisans and travellers, sailors and soldiers – and came to rival the broadside ballads in their ubiquity in the streets and fields of early modern England.

This is an expensive book, aimed at the academic market. That is a great shame, as it should be widely read, and not only by those interested in early music. For this book is not only about music; it is an attempt to reconstruct the early modern mind-set. We are encouraged to make 'an ambitious leap of imagination' (p. 328) in almost every chapter; to consider that the culture of the past was not a straightforward thing, as 'our ancestors thrived on riddle, rhyme and resonance' (p. 327); to accept that fashionable people

BOOK REVIEWS

could 'tap their feet while shaking their heads' (p. 266). The book contains insights that are of profound importance to professional and amateur historians of all kinds. It should certainly be required reading for those trying to understand the paradoxes, subtleties and ambiguities of Oliver Cromwell.