



Astrid Stilma, ***A King Translated: The Writings of King James VI & I and their Interpretation in the Low Countries, 1593-1603*** (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012, 324 pp., ISBN 978 0 7546 6188 7).

‘The wisest fool in Christendom’. This is how King James VI & I (1567-1625) of Scotland and England has often been described. Born in 1566 to the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots, he was raised a protestant in Reformation-torn Scotland. She abdicated in his favour when he was just one year old, making him one of the youngest kings to ever have reigned. Several regents ruled in his place during his minority, while James was educated by his tutors, the most famous and notorious of whom was George Buchanan, a gifted humanist scholar and historian. James grew up to be a learned man. He was a competent poet and author, and gained European-wide fame for his writings. He also took an active interest in church affairs and theological issues. Best known for the King James’ Bible which is still in use in Britain and elsewhere today, he also penned his own works and is well-known for his absolutist notions of kingship. As Elizabeth I of England’s successor, he was the first British king and his ideas on how to unite his two kingdoms in a ‘union of love’ still bear relevance today, as the United Kingdom faces a challenge in the shape of the referendum on Scottish independence in the Autumn of 2014.

James not only concerned himself with the political and religious affairs of his own kingdoms, he also played a role of importance on the European stage, and across the Atlantic. He saw himself as a European player with a particular role, namely that of peacemaker-king. When he succeeded his relative, Elizabeth I, Protestant Europe had high expectations of the new King and few more so than the rebels in the Dutch Republic who had spent years trying to convince the English Queen to support them in their fight against Spain. Jubilation and anticipation soon turned to bitter disappointment, however, when James decided to make peace with Spain. Despite strong Orange-Stuart connections – James’ eldest son Prince Henry upheld a close friendship with Maurice of Orange and his daughter Elizabeth married Frederick, the Elector Palatine and a nephew of William the Silent – the Peace came as a blow and James’ popularity plummeted. Even his personal interests in the Synod of Dordt a decade and a half later, could not restore the popular perception. This perhaps explains why, in the Netherlands, James and his writings have received relatively little attention from historians. In her impressively

researched book, based on her PhD thesis, Astrid Stilma addresses this historiographical gap and offers a well written analysis of the translation and reception of four of James' writings in the Low Countries.

From the 1580s onwards, as Stilma explains, James' works made an appearance across Europe and soon after his succession to the English throne, Dutch translations appeared of the poem *The Battle of Lepanto*, which had already appeared in a Dutch translation in 1593; the tract on kingship *Basilikon Doron*; the theological *Meditations* and the *Daemonologie*, the King's famous contribution to the subject of witchcraft. In six chapters, Stilma analyses both the historical context, the translations themselves and the reception they received across the Channel. Chapter I paints a detailed picture of the printers and others involved in the translations. For historians of British-Dutch relations, it is useful as a stand alone chapter. It provides a good insight into an early modern world which still owed a great deal to the medieval North Sea culture on the one hand and to the close, and often unofficially sanctioned, cooperation between the British Isles and the Dutch provinces, on the other. Chapter II deals with early modern translation and will appeal most to literary scholars, and the remaining four chapters each address one of James' works. Stilma provides both historical and literary context and provides an analysis of the original texts, as well as of their translation. Most of these were done in the Dutch capital by the so-called 'Amsterdam group' of printers, who were largely faithful in their translation, bar the occasional idiomatic error, but who nevertheless made 'their presence felt in the translations themselves by leaving signs of what was on their minds' (273). The Dutch context of the revolt against Spain is clearly present in the texts' accompanying verses and sonnets. They provide commentaries on the true nature of kingship (*Basilikon Doron*) or interpret the works in a Dutch context (*The Battle of Lepanto* reflects the victory of the city of Vlissingen in withstanding the Spanish). Moreover, there appears to have been an indirect interplay between translators and King: upon his English succession, the latter saw in James a hero of international Protestantism, who would surely support his Dutch co-religionists, while James certainly tried to fashion himself as both a Protestant and a European King and peacemaker. Perhaps predictably, James' translations had little impact beyond their appearance in the year of hope, 1603, although Stilma has found an afterlife of sorts. It would have been interesting to hear whether the later Dutch Stuarts, Willem II and his wife and their son, the King-Stadholder William III, ever read James' works but this can hardly be held against the author.

If I have one criticism, it is that Stilma at times is a little too reliant perhaps on other theorists, in particular the work of the late Kevin Sharpe. She appears more at ease with the translatory aspects than with the historical analysis; a slight lack of confidence perhaps which, to this reader, seems wholly unjustified. Her book straddles the divide between the literary and historical subjects very successfully and I recommend it to all scholars interested in James VI & I and his world.

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