This is a fascinating study of an enigmatic king, James I, the "king unleashed," who reappeared on the Scottish scene in 1424 after an English captivity of eighteen years. Michael Brown's interpretation of the king strengthens the picture presented by Ranald Nicholson, but also attempts to understand the context in which James acted. Jenny Wormald's questioning of the traditional picture of the fifteenth century as a period of weak kings dominated by over-mighty magnates will be further strengthened by this work. Brown's study shows the grim reality behind the king's power as he mercilessly crushed one magnate after another, a process only halted by his own death at the hands of his nobles.

As Brown shows in his introduction, traditional images of James have varied widely, from the law-giver king to the grasping tyrant. The chronicler Walter Bower, writing in the 1440s, praised James as a strong and wise king, while his contemporary, John Shirley, the English author of "The Dethe of the Kynge of Scotis," portrays him as a bad ruler who deserved his violent end. Recent work on the fifteenth century has attempted to assess James' impact on the politics of that era, but this latest volume in the series *The Stewart Dynasty in Scotland* is the first full-length recent study of the king.

Brown provides some fascinating insights into the king's character in his examination of the impact of events of James' childhood on his later actions. The murder of his elder brother David, Duke of Rothesay, when James was eight apparently had a lasting effect on James' perceptions of the position of the monarch. Rothesay had begun to exercise power as king's lieutenant in 1399 and Brown argues that his approach to rule, more active and interventionist than that of his father and grandfather, alienated powerful nobles such as Albany and Douglas. Rothesay's murder demonstrated to James how precarious the position of the ruler, especially one who challenged the power of the nobles, could be and also began a long-lasting hatred of the Albany Stewart family at whose hands Rothesay met his death. James' distrust of the family was strengthened by the Duke of Albany's failure to secure his release from English
captivity after 1406. The consequences of that hatred were played out in 1424-5 when James destroyed the Albany family.

Brown makes a strong argument for the role of foreign influence on James’s ideas about kingship. During his English captivity from the age of 12 to the age of 30, James grew to maturity in the court of one of the strongest and most charismatic kings of the age, Henry V. The image of the strong and powerful warrior king left its mark on James who would try to replicate it in Scotland. Failure came at a heavy price. Brown argues that it was James’ humiliating military campaign against Roxburgh in 1436 which led to cracks in his image as a powerful ruler, and that this helped lead to his assassination the following year. As James’ example suggests, English models of government were not always appropriate for Scotland.

Moreover, in Scotland, the nobles were not used to strong power at the centre, and James faced much opposition to his attempts to extend direct royal power throughout the realm. Brown discusses James’ involvement with many different parts of his realm, including the north, the southwest and the southeast, his campaigns against the Lords of the Isles, and his fluctuating relationship with the Douglasses and the earls of Mar, March and Dunbar. He also suggests why Atholl finally turns against him. Genealogies are included to help readers sort out the various family relationships which were so important in explaining alliances and conflicts. James dealt with opposition by surprise attacks on individual magnates; these attacks accomplished his short-term goals but left a sense of insecurity among surviving magnates which was to fatally undermine their trust in the king.

The attempts to introduce English-style monarchy to Scotland was resisted by more than just the nobles. Building up the prestige of the monarchy so that the king was no longer simply one of the leading magnates of the country, was an expensive undertaking, as James’s works at Edinburgh, Stirling and Linlithgow show. In England, regular taxation had been accepted by a country used to paying for the overseas ambitions of its kings, but in Scotland it was a different story. Parliament showed itself willing to raise money to pay for James’ ransom on his return, but as it became clear that the ransom money was being diverted into other projects, James found it increasingly
difficult to get agreement for new taxes. Moreover, as ties with France were strengthened the very necessity to pay the ransom ceased and with it James’ best excuse for imposing taxation. James was successful in establishing the Scottish monarchy’s international prestige, but such prestige seems to have been more important to the king than to his country.

Brown seriously dents James’ reputation as a law-giver king, suggesting that the reasons behind much of his legislation had as much to do with personal gain as with any true concern with justice. He shows that even Bower who did most to promote this image may have had some doubts about it. James’ own methods of dealing with his nobles suggests a king who was not averse to ignoring the law when it suited him. James’ surprise attacks on those he regarded as his enemies were not likely to instill much trust in their king by the nobles who witnessed them. Brown indeed suggests that the king’s unpopularity was widespread by the time of his death at Perth.

Brown includes an interesting discussion of Joan Beaufort’s role, and her vulnerability to James’s assassins. To have killed the queen as well would have been unprecedented, even though she was Atholl’s main rival for control of the regency; Brown argues that her political role increased during the 1430s, although this is not traced in detail. One assassin prevented the murder by saying that she was only a woman, a mistake which he soon regretted and which was to cost him his life.

James ruled Scotland directly for only thirteen years, but many of the new aspects of kingship which he introduced to Scotland were taken up and strengthened by his successors. In Brown’s words, James’ “personal rule marked a return to active monarchy after almost half a century of weak kings and delegated authority” (p.xii) It will be interesting to see if the future volume in this series on Robert II and Robert III affirms this picture of the period before James’ rule. However, for good or ill, James’ successors would prove that the idea of a strong monarch had come to Scotland to stay.

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