Keay, A. *The Restless Republic: Britain Without a Crown*. London: Williams Collins Books. 2022. 496 pp. ISBN: 978-0-00-828202-8. Price: £25.00.

The Interregnum period (1649–1660) has never captured the imagination of scholars, nor the general public, in the same way which the civil wars of the proceeding decade have. The 1650s saw the three Stuart kingdoms of England (which had annexed Wales in 1284), Scotland and Ireland ruled over by the newborn English Commonwealth, which was succeeded by the English Protectorate in 1653. Caught between the high politics and bloody conflicts of the 1640s and the glamourous (but still bloody) Restoration regime of the 1660s, the 1650s have traditionally, and unfairly, been seen as a stopgap, Britain and Ireland's seventeenth-century lull. It has never attracted the level of scholarly interest which it deserves, and because it remains a complex period which evolved out of the confessional skulduggery and cross-archipelagic politics of the civil wars, it remains a daunting period for general readers to access. For far too long the period has yearned for an accessible overview text which can provide clarity for students and enthusiasts while dispelling the traditional misconceptions which have lingered, despite the excellent work of those few scholars who have tried to penetrate its mists before.[1]

This is the task which Dr Anna Keay set herself in her latest book, *The Restless Republic: Britain Without a Crown*. Dr Keay will be familiar to many, whether through her previous works which have included monographs on Charles II and James Scott, Duke of Monmouth, through her various TV and radio appearances, or through her stellar work as Director of the Landmark Trust. While Keay has tended to focus on the later seventeenth century, it is difficult to think of a better suited scholar who might be up to the daunting task which this book presents.

Keay's objective, as mentioned at several points in the book, is twofold. Firstly, she sought to provide a lively and engaging narrative of the period. Secondly, she hopes that this volume will make the case that the interregnum regimes were vibrant and capable early modern states which were not destined to fail. To achieve this, and to provide for a scholarly and general readership, Keay guides her readers through the 1650s via the experiences of a handful of characters. The selected ensemble are not the usual suspects of 'great men' but include a balance of men and women from a range of backgrounds and perspectives. This produces

1 Some of the excellent scholarship on this period includes: Martyn Bennett, Raymond Gillespie and R. Scott Spurlock (eds.) (2020), Sarah Covington (2022), Barry Coward (2002), Francis Dow (1979), John D. Granger (1998), Ronald Hutton (2021), Patrick Little and David L. Smith (2009), Micheál Ó Siochrú (2009) and R. Scott Spurlock (2007).

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a social history of the commonwealth and protectorate through the eyes of those who witnessed their political lifespans.

Protagonists include Charlotte Stanley, Countess of Derby, Machamont Nedham, editor of *Mercurius Britanicus* and *Mercurius Pragmaticus*, and Anna Trapnel, the famed Puritan mystic and member of the Fifth Monarchists. The chronological narrative is engaging and clearly referenced, soothing the minds of both the daunted general reader and sceptical scholar. At times the book embraces artful storytelling over clinical historical dissection, but this is never done to the extent to cause too much alarm to the historically pedantic. Similarly, the book does exceedingly well throughout to provide an accessible viewpoint on the complex confessional identities and beliefs of the period without resorting to theological discourses on predestination or the priesthood of all believers. Chapter two's discussion of the trail of Charles I is particularly commendable for its clarity and powerful analysis. Likewise, Chapter seven's consideration of the development of popular politics and the political press through Nedham's editorial life is excellent. The incorporation of female voices and those from various social standings highlights their importance in the telling of the Cromwellian regime's foundation, survival and downfall. Moreover, this approach effectively underlines the long-term impact of the civil wars, the ways in which it ripped apart families and communities, and the wounds it inflicted which never quite healed. In short, the book does what it sets out to do, but there are caveats.

Despite its title, this is not a book about Britain during the interregnum. It is a book about England, written from an Anglo-centric perspective. This is a point which Keay does attempt to address in the foreword, where she states that: 'while the book had 'Britain' in its title, it is fully acknowledged that Britain here — rather as was the case with the first 'British' parliaments of 1656–7 — is weighted towards England'. This backpedalling flies in the face of the back cover's claims to provide a narrative which ranges from 'London to Leith, Cornwall to Connacht'. This criticism might be seen as a Celtic troupe unfairly deployed against a book which sets out its stall in its foreword. However, not only does this sidestep the issue of Britain being used synonymously with England in the title, it also has hugely significant ramifications throughout the book's nineteen chapters.

'The Scots' and Irish (not to mention the Welsh) are not even supporting characters in the text, but monolithic background contours in the English landscape. Important developments and events in Ireland and Scotland are overlooked if not simply ignored. Perhaps most gallingly, Glencairn's Rising (1653–1655) is barely mentioned, indeed, its namesake is not discussed at all. While mindful of the author's need to provide an accessible and streamlined narrative, the result is skewed and misleading. For example, in the opening contextual chapter, Wales is not mentioned, neither are important events in the other kingdoms, including the Confederates' Wars (1642–8) and Engagement (1647–8). The focus on purely English movements and characters, including the Levellers and Diggers (neither of

which existed in Scotland or Ireland), ignores events in the other British kingdoms. Of those nineteen chapters, two focus on Ireland and one on Scotland — all three via the eyes of the Englishmen, William Petty and George Monck. Thus, two of the three kingdoms are marginalised within the narrative as conquered provinces without a frank discussion of the realities of what military rule looked like there. A case in point of this is as follows: the Cromwellian conquests of Ireland and Scotland in 1650 and 1651 are covered in a single sentence in chapter five. Ireland fares better than Scotland overall, thanks to chapter 13's discussion of Henry Cromwell and Thomas Fleetwood's overlordship there and the 1652 Act for the Settlement of Ireland, however the full extent of Cromwellian rule (including Fleetwood's repressive administration) is not detailed.

The book concludes with an epilogue which provides a sweeping overview of Charles II's restoration and his regime's efforts to turn back the clock, including its surprising restraint in its pursuit of protectorate collaborators. Here, as above, the focus remains firmly on England, with Ireland and Scotland covered in a single paragraph. The latter's future between 1660 and 1707 is summarised in a worryingly sweeping statement that Scotland's 'subordination' continued until its parliament 'voted for its own abandonment'. The nuances of post-1660 politics, culture and religion in Ireland and Scotland are ignored. England, again, fares better from this conclusionary review. However, even here, when attention turns to the legacy of the interregnum and its impact on the Williamite Revolution, there is an aura of inevitability brought about by the expansion of the public political sphere and the 'new assertiveness' of the English Parliament. This is historiographically contentious to say the least.

This is an excellently written and engaging book which has rightly been commended for its accessibility and engrossing style.[2] One must celebrate the huge feat which this book represents. The topic is richer for its existence, and it will undoubtedly attract new interest to this fascinating period. However, the worryingly Anglo-centric focus provides a terribly lopsided perspective on 'Britain without a crown' which, perhaps inadvertently, furthers a narrative in which Scotland and Ireland (and Wales) are sidelined in the story of the 1650s. All of the protagonists are English, and even when Scotland and Ireland appear they are hastily dealt with without the depth or care which is spent on England. Had the title been 'England without a crown', that might have presented issues of its own but would have explained the book's focus. Thus, for all its achievements, this book also represents a missed opportunity for a fresh and nuanced discussion of Britain and Ireland's interregnum experience.

2 The book was the winner of the Duff Cooper Prize for Non-Fiction (2022), The Sunday Times History Book of the Year (2022) and was shortlisted for the Baillie Gifford Prize for Non-Fiction (2022).

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