

Rose, Jacqueline, ed., *The Politics of Counsel in England and Scotland, 1286–1707* (Proceedings of the British Academy, 204), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016; hardcover; pp. xii, 303; R.R.P. £70.00; ISBN 0197266038.

The Politics of Counsel addresses a curious lacuna in the scholarship: what does counsel actually mean? The concept is referred to in a rather nebulous way, primarily because, as Jacqueline Rose and her contributors demonstrate, it means different things to different people in different places. This excellent collection brings together the themes of counsel and politics across an ambitious timeframe in ways that have generally been overlooked.

While Rose has produced an excellent opening essay on the ‘problem’ of counsel, the forty-three page introduction is daunting for readers. It would have been better to separate out the introduction and chapter summaries from the methodological framework Rose has so thoroughly outlined. Nevertheless, Rose makes a clear case for the need to consider the histories of counsel and councils together: intellectually, politically, and socially.

Michael Brown analyses Scottish counsel from the mid-thirteenth to mid-fifteenth centuries, and suggests that the nobility were generally more involved in counsel than has previously been noted. John Watts’s contribution analyses counsel in England from the mid-fourteenth to mid-sixteenth centuries. Ambitious [page 202] in its sweep, the chapter certainly has a more historiographical focus, but ends by reminding us how ‘counsel is a broad term covering a range of different constitutional needs and political and governmental processes’ (pp. 84-85).

An analysis of the earliest surviving written memoranda of counsel, from early fifteenth-century England, is the focus of Jeremy Catto’s contribution. These memoranda are notable for their businesslike vernacular: they mirror the spoken word. Similarly, Eliza Hartrich focuses on urban councils in the same period, arguing that municipal and royal councils share many more common traits than is usually acknowledged—especially as urban councils counselled the mayor.

A single political poem from fifteenth-century Scotland, ‘The Harp’, is the focus of Claire Hawes’s chapter. While she argues convincingly that the piece should be read as a criticism of James III, her conclusions are sometimes implausible. Richard Rex studies the reign of Henry VIII, with an emphasis on the 1530s, demonstrating that Henry used the ‘image’ of listening to counsel to impose his authority on his subjects.

Susan Doran’s chapter on Elizabeth I and counsel is a much-needed re-assessment of a topic that has become somewhat nebulous in the scholarship. Doran’s conclusions—that Elizabeth sought advice from the relevant people, that Parliament was a particular kind of counsel, and the importance of Elizabeth putting on a show to appear that she was listening to counsel—are all points that are not made clearly enough in the current scholarship.

Paulina Kewes's excellent contribution analyses counsel and early Elizabethan drama. In focusing on the powerfully public nature of dramatic counsel, Kewes offers a much needed interdisciplinary assessment of the way drama and dramatists both demonstrated their loyalty and offered counsel and commentary on contemporary politics.

With the accession of James VI of Scotland as James I of England, an awkward system of conciliar government was imposed in Scotland. James, for instance, only returned home once after 1603, in 1617. Alan MacDonald's chapter thus analyses Scotland between 1603 and 1638, demonstrating the difficulties Scots had in counselling an absent monarch.

Technically outside the volume's scope, Alexander Haskell's chapter on the general assembly convened in Virginia in 1619 is nevertheless illuminating. While focused more on 'council' than 'counsel', Haskell demonstrates both that councils provided stability, and that they preserved the colonists' privileges in sometimes self-perpetuating ways.

Roger Mason's focus is on the theory of counsel, and he analyses political thought in seventeenth-century Scotland by focusing on the writings of David Hume of Godscroft, William Drummond, and Sir James Balfour. These men held disparate political leanings, but all expounded the need for counsel.

The final two chapters are by Rose herself. The first is a study of royalist ideas of counsel during the English Revolution. She uses Sir Edward Hyde as a case study, and argues that councillors' oaths influenced the advice they gave. **[page 203]** Her second chapter is a broad study of counsel and the Union question in the seventeenth-century. This piece clearly is the foundation of a much larger piece, but her discussion of the rarity of, and problems associated with, 'British' councils, is certainly thought provoking.

The collection is incredibly cohesive, with chapters engaging with each other. Its focus is certainly skewed towards early modern England, and the noticeable absence of Wales and Ireland does prevent a clear picture of the relationship between a monarch and their subjects emerging: as much as I enjoyed Haskell's chapter, it could have been replaced with one on Wales or Ireland. Nevertheless, this is a superbly-edited collection that makes an excellent addition to the scholarship on counsel in medieval and early modern England and Scotland.