

A royal rake's progress

The Mistresses of Charles II

By Brian Masters
(Blond & Briggs, £6.95)

The Image of the King

By Richard Ollard
(Hodder, £7.95)

Readers who like serious history and those who go for the saucy bits can both enjoy the juicy and compelling account of the women in the life of Charles II written by Brian Masters, from whom we learn things of an intimate nature which the usual historian simply could not mention.

Mr Masters provides a full-length portrait of the villainous, rapacious, unspeakably evil Barbara Villiers (alias Castlemaine, Palmer and Cleveland), one of those girls who will "do anything". And if you want a racy description of Frances Stuart as the great tease, fending off the King's fumbings, or of how the court conspired to have Louise Keroualle raped by the King while his ministers and their wives stood around the bed pulling her clothes off, this too can be yours for only a few pounds.

All this may sound frivolous. Yet such books are an important supplement to the sober accounts of great personages which all too often form the only reading matter we encounter about ages past.

Not that Charles II could be described as a great personage. Mr Masters relates his iniquity and immorality in explicit detail, but is himself evidently hypnotized by the man, for after telling us at some length how awful the King was, he concludes by insisting that he was "an admirable and amiable man", a judgment with which, on his own evidence, few readers are likely to agree.

In an otherwise complete gallery Mr Masters omits reference to Charles II's earliest love, Chrystabel Wyndham. But despite some defects and omissions of this sort, his book is well written, admirably brief, and makes compulsive reading.

An antidote to any misplaced intoxication with Charles II is the profound and thoughtful study by Richard Ollard. Although it deals with both Charles I and Charles II, it is preponderantly concerned with the latter.

Mr Ollard has written a mild, impartial and unbiased account which shows truly what a monster Charles II was. The author takes as his mentor the Victorian historian Samuel Gardiner, of whom he says: "We approach (with him) as near to omniscient impartiality as is given to men". If only more historians shared Mr Ollard's desire to emulate him.

Mr Ollard has attempted to consider the "images" projected by the two Stuart



Nell Gwynne as Venus with her two sons, from a Henry Gascar etching

monarchs, and he does this in several interesting ways. That the Stuarts practised the arts of Madison Avenue is no surprise, for their predecessor Henry VII did so shamelessly, and attempted to "project an image" of himself as a figure of Arthurian legend, even naming his eldest son Arthur.

The Image of the King discusses the well-known iconography of Stuart kingly portraiture, and shows how later versions of portraits of Charles I alter the expression on his face: "Innocence and martyrdom have been added to the hauteur of the portrait", to accord with later Tory political attempts to elevate Charles I to the status of a martyr, which of course made the Whigs furious. It

also offers a fascinating survey of the shifts of opinion and interpretation by historians from Stuart times until the present regarding the two Charleses.

Mr Ollard tends to forget that his readers will not know immediately who Clarendon and Ormonde and all the other characters of the age are. He should have made some effort to introduce his personalities.

But with this single fault (plus an unaccountably breathless staccato style for the introductory chapter) his book is to be recommended far above more popular exercises in romance and legend such as feature at the tops of best-seller lists.

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