

This study of Frances Coke Villiers, daughter of Sir Edward Coke and Elizabeth Cecil, focuses on a woman who, although 'neither a political person, nor a literary one' (p.xxi), became embroiled in legal battles and scandals which make her life-story worth telling. It is recounted with aplomb by Johanna Luthman, who has done an excellent job of reconstructing a complicated narrative based on the surviving correspondence of Frances and her contemporaries, plus various administrative and legal records.

Frances was born in August 1602, younger sister to Elizabeth Coke, and in September 1617 married Sir John Villiers, a match arranged by her father and resisted by her mother. The early years of the marriage went well, but John's declining mental health and frequent absences as he travelled with James I meant that the couple lived increasingly apart by the early 1620s, and Frances became reliant for money on her brother-in-law and royal favourite, the Duke of Buckingham. In 1623 Frances took a lover, Sir Robert Howard, and the couple met for assignations at Denmark House and more generally around London and in the Home Counties. In 1624 Frances fell pregnant and that October gave birth to a boy, Robert. By February 1625 news of the affair and the birth were circulating, and in March Frances and Howard were put on trial before the Court of High Commission. The case was disrupted due to the death of James I in March and the outbreak of plague that summer, but in November 1627 the couple were found guilty of adultery.

Frances was to be imprisoned, fined, and made to do public penance, but refused to attend the Savoy Church to perform the latter. The Privy Council issued two arrest warrants, and on the issuing of the second sought to seize Frances from her lodgings in the Savoy, only for her to escape by dressing her page in her clothes and using him as a decoy whilst she fled in men's attire. In March 1628 Frances was excommunicated and appealed to the Lords to assert her privileges as a lady, but the Parliamentary Committee of Privileges ruled against her, stating that she had forfeited them when she committed adultery. The Lords were divided on the matter, but a vote on the issue also went against Frances in April 1628. Subsequently Frances fled to Shropshire and hid out on Howard's estate in Clun until 1632 when she moved to live with her aging father at Stoke, who died in 1634. That winter Frances returned to London and was reunited with Howard, but in March 1635 the couple were arrested, and Frances was placed in the Gatehouse Prison at Westminster. In April the couple were ordered to appear before High Commission again, but Frances refused, bribed the Gatehouse Keeper, and escaped (again in men's apparel), fleeing to Guernsey, St Malo, and ultimately Paris.

In July 1635 and February 1636 Charles sent messengers with warrants to deliver to Frances, who was able to gain some degree of protection from Richelieu and later from Louis XIII. In Paris she also met the exiled Kenelm Digby and converted to Catholicism, living briefly in a Parisian convent. In 1641 Frances returned to England and petitioned the Lords, arguing that she and her husband had been separated against their wills so that her in-laws could gain greater control over the property she brought to the marriage. The abolition of High Commission in July 1641 lifted the threat of her having to do penance, and John was persuaded (possibly due to his poor mental health) to accept Robert as his biological son, treating the boy with much affection. However, the family reunion was to be disrupted by the outbreak of war, and after her goods were confiscated by Parliament in October 1644 Frances retreated to Oxford, where she fell ill during the siege of May 1645 and was buried on 4 June.

Based on its salacious title and low cost, this is a book which OUP (and possibly the author) hope will reach beyond a scholarly audience. The narrative is lively enough to keep the casual reader engaged, who will learn much not only about Frances, but also early modern childhood, marriage and sexuality as Luthman includes useful summaries of recent work at relevant points in the text. For academic historians the book fits well within the literatures on elite women, court scandal and the crisis in gender relations in early Stuart England, although in the final chapter Luthman might have done more to locate her discussion of Frances (and her son Robert) within the historiography on women (and men) in the civil wars. This is the second book by Luthman that I have had the pleasure to review; I have learned much from both and eagerly await the third.