

William & Mary Law School

William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository

Library Newsletter

The Wolf Law Library

4-2-2009

Patriarcha or, The Natural Power of Kings

Kevin Butterfield

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/libnewsletter>

Copyright c 2009 by the authors. This article is brought to you by the William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository.

<https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/libnewsletter>

Patriarcha or, The Natural Power of Kings

A Rare Book Room treasure from the George Wythe Collection

Filmer, Robert, Sir (d. 1653). *Patriarcha or, The Natural Power of Kings.* London : Printed, and are to be sold by Walter Davis Book-binder, in Amen-Corner, near Pater-noster-row, 1680.

Sir Robert Filmer was born around 1588 and educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, and at Lincoln's Inn. He was well placed in the court of Charles I and thus came to be knighted. While he was too old to fight for the king during the Civil Wars he was briefly imprisoned as a Royalist and his house in East Sutton was sacked. Filmer died in 1653 and his importance was chiefly posthumous.

Filmer's political tracts, which were published between 1648 and 1653, were re-published by Tories who believed in the divine right of kings during the Exclusion Crisis of 1679-1680. These included *The Freeholder's Grand Inquest* (1679) which argued that Parliament only sat at the king's will. Another was *The Anarchy of a Limited or Mixed Monarchy* which argued that any limitations on

monarchical power, of whatever kind, would make a nonsense of the king's authority, an argument repeated in his tract *The Necessity of the Absolute Power of All Kings*, and his major work, *Patriarcha* (written 1638 but published 1680). *Patriarcha* is now largely remembered because John Locke launches a cogent attack on its premises in his first *Treatise on Government* (drafted 1681-1682 and published 1689). Filmer argued that the state should be seen as a family whose father was the king to whom all subjects owed the obedience and respect of children. Filmer derived his argument from the premise that Adam was the first earthly king and that all subsequent monarchs derived their authority from him. Such ideas seemed to Charles I and later Stuart monarchs to provide a rationale for the absolutist right to govern, notwithstanding the evident weakness of the parallels drawn between families and states. (Clark, Robert, University of East Anglia. "Sir Robert Filmer." *The Literary Encyclopedia*)

Patriarcha may be viewed in the St. George Rare Book Room at the Wolf Law Library, College of William & Mary School of Law.

-- Kevin Butterfield

