

Winner of the 2013 Article Prize

David Cressy, “Saltpetre, State Security and Vexation in Early Modern England,” *Past & Present* 212 (August 2011): 73-211

The article prize committee read many fascinating contributions to both historical and literary studies, and our deliberations were long and sometimes passionate. In the end, though, we were unanimous that one piece shone especially brightly.

David Cressy’s “Saltpetre, State Security and Vexation in Early Modern England,” published in *Past & Present* in August 2011, spans and unites many different fields of analysis – military, political, religious. Cressy demonstrates how the English government’s ever-more persistent and intrusive pursuit of saltpetre – the crucial ingredient in gunpowder – ultimately comprised one of the most powerful of grievances in the years leading up to the outbreak of the English Civil War. The heart of the problem was that, until the late-seventeenth-century expansion of trade to the East Indies opened vast new resources, saltpetre could only be derived from soil rich in dung. The early Stuarts succeeded in alienating good will across the social spectrum. Their “saltpetremen” proved as willing to infuriate aristocrats, by destroying their pigeon coops, as they were ready to horrify entire congregations by undermining the foundations of their parish churches. Cressy’s vivid account, derived from an unparalleled command of his sources, persuades his readers that the pursuit of saltpetre, featured so prominently in the Grand Remonstrance, may ultimately have been a more persistent and aggravating force for resentment of the Caroline regime than even Ship Money or the billeting of troops.

He does all of this with the clarity of exposition and elegance of expression that are the hallmarks of one of the most distinguished historians of early modern England. The committee congratulates him on another revelatory work of scholarship.