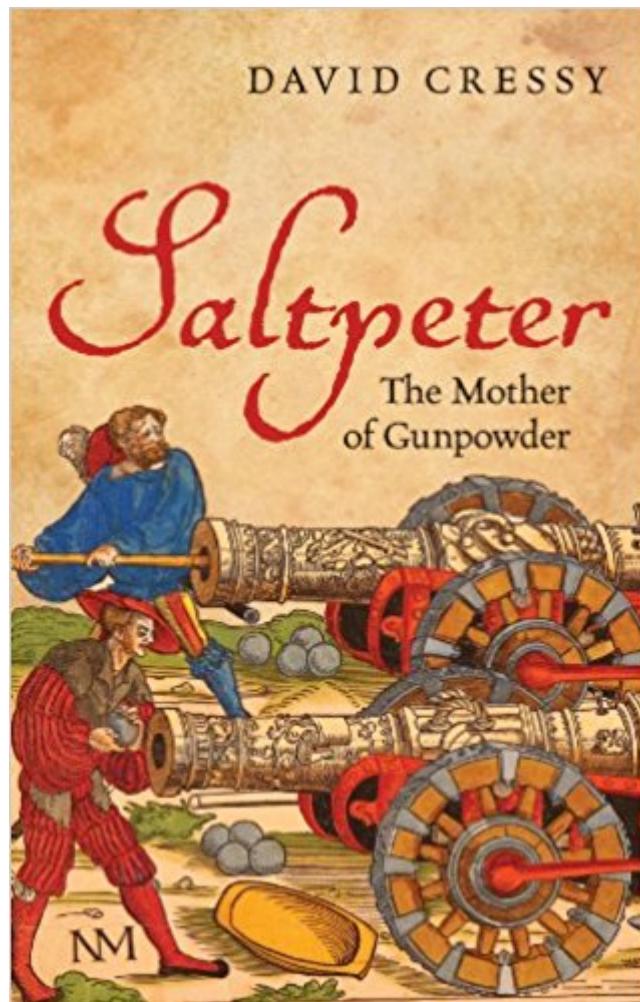


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Saltpeter: The Mother Of Gunpowder



Synopsis

This is the story of saltpeter, the vital but mysterious substance craved by governments from the Tudors to the Victorians as an 'inestimable treasure.' National security depended on control of this organic material - that had both mystical and mineral properties. Derived from soil enriched with dung and urine, it provided the heart or 'mother' of gunpowder, without which no musket or cannon could be fired. Its acquisition involved alchemical knowledge, exotic technology, intrusions into people's lives, and eventual dominance of the world's oceans. The quest for saltpeter caused widespread 'vexation' in Tudor and Stuart England, as crown agents dug in homes and barns and even churches. Governments hungry for it purchased supplies from overseas merchants, transferred skills from foreign experts, and extended patronage to ingenious schemers, while the hated 'saltpetermen' intruded on private ground. Eventually, huge saltpeter imports from India relieved this social pressure, and by the eighteenth century positioned Britain as a global imperial power; the governments of revolutionary America and ancien régime France, on the other hand, were forced to find alternative sources of this treasured substance. In the end, it was only with the development of chemical explosives in the late Victorian period that dependency on saltpeter finally declined. *Saltpeter, the Mother of Gunpowder* tells this fascinating story for the first time. Lively and entertaining in its own right, it is also a tale with far-reaching implications. As David Cressy's engaging narrative makes clear, the story of saltpeter is vital not only in explaining the inter-connected military, scientific, and political 'revolutions' of the seventeenth century; it also played a key role in the formation of the centralized British nation state - and that state's subsequent dominance of the waves in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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Customer Reviews

We definitely could use more books like this one: precise, informative, connecting seemingly minor issues to the bigger pictures. Lots of, let's say, "ambitious" authors spawn books in attempts to describe themes like Rise of the West, Rise of English Empire or Evolution of State (preferably in only 300 pages), but after you've read enough of such high history you start to cherish detailed studies that focus on single important thing. By going down to earth we can review our general assumptions because devil is in the details, and what could be more "down to earth" than this book on saltpeter? The title is a confusing one. While other European states get some coverage, the book is primarily about English experience. The author leads us from the earliest days of saltpeter production to the end of English dependency on domestic supplies. Do not take this book as a technical one. The chemistry is not the main hero of this story. You will find out why English governments regarded saltpeter as an 'inestimable treasure' and sought it for their 'infinite security', of how did saltpeter affect English wars. As a military history buff, I have found surprisingly little new for me in description of production and usage of saltpeter, but that is not the sole content of the book. As a legal history buff I enjoyed reading about people's resistance against saltpetermen. There are many essential issues touched here, like limits of state authority, birth of right to defend one's home and the main question of how far can we infringe personal right in the name of government's needs. I also liked rich bibliography which is like 34% of the whole book. Well done!

A solid history of England's never ending quest for gunpowder, Cressy highlights the search for domestic and foreign supplies of saltpeter, the largest (75 %) ingredient in making the essential military commodity. The power of the state (to mine saltpeter) versus the rights of individuals and private property comprises another main theme of the work, with the state in the ascendancy. The work opens another window into 17th century English politics and society. The only weakness of the book is the author's treatment of the saltpeter industry in the English colonies and later the United

States. While he is correct in noting that the American industry was largely an independent creation, he ignores the large revival of the industry in the 1850s and the Confederacy's subsequent reliance on saltpeter mining from southern caves during the Civil War. One can hardly write about the American saltpeter industry without referencing the work of Marion O. Smith, the top scholar of U.S. saltpeter production, but Cressy ignores his work, along with the archaeological and historical literature on the many HUNDREDS of saltpeter sites across the karst landscapes of the eastern U.S. But the majority of the book is well-researched and well-written, a real contribution to the field. But takes what he says about the American industry with a pinch of salt (or maybe potassium nitrate).

Professor Cressy has uncovered a fascinating narrative but only manages to cover a small piece of a global story, focusing on saltpeter production trade and policy in England mostly from the 15th to the 18th centuries. Let us hope he has gathered enough material to write another book with a broader scope. His writing is clear and the style academic, i.e. every chapter begins with a summary of what the rest of the chapter is about. Overall, a valuable contribution to a neglected subject of study.

Excellent source book. Pleased that carries this.

While the exceptional detail of the Crowns need for salt peter was amazing, it got boring real fast. As an academic study this is amazing. As a read, it is a sleeping pill. The need for salt peter to make gun powder is one of those fascinating and over looked facets of the history of empires. Much like the need for Yew trees to make bows and Oaks to make ships. These vital supplies formed the foundation for the dreams of empires - without which they could never have been realized. But for pete sake, the drudgery of reading this could have been lightened considerably with some anecdotal stories and broadened story telling that included additional details of the process and its' technological progress. And how that impacted the relations between the crown and her subjects would have made it much more interesting. I know that was not the authors objective, which he makes clear in the forward. As he lays out, it is a formidable inquiry into the political and legal history of salt peter acquisition. But it was dreadfully repetitive - by which I mean that the same issues and confrontations appear throughout the history of this vital but difficult to get material. Which may have been the point. I also have to express my respect and amazement that the author was able to hunt down the documentation that he presents. Comprehensive and exhaustive - heck

amazing that these records exist!

Very interesting

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