

Modern European History

Unit 6 – Revolutions

Charles II: The Reality Behind the Merry Monarchy

By Tim Harris; "History Today," Volume: 55 Issue 6, 2005.

Directions: Read and annotate the following text:



Portrait of Charles II by Sir Peter Lely

Tim Harris explores the political spin, intolerance and repression that underlay Charles II's relaxed image, and which led him into a deep crisis in 1678-81 yet also enabled him to survive it.

The story of Charles II's reign is one of inexorable descent into crisis and then belated and sudden escape from it. One of the King's most impressive accomplishments, therefore, is that he avoided the fates of either his predecessor or successor. Charles I had provoked all of his three kingdoms to rebel against him and had been executed outside his own Banqueting House in January 1649 for allegedly committing treason against his people. James II was forced to flee his kingdom after less than four years on the throne in the face of a foreign invasion and desertions among his own military and civilian population. Yet Charles II, despite the fact that his regime seemed in serious trouble by the late 1670s, managed to end his reign peacefully in his bed, having manoeuvred himself out of crisis with a skill and adroitness not typically associated with Stuart rulers, and having significantly reinvigorated the powers of the monarchy in the process. It was a remarkable achievement, though one that came at enormous human cost.

There is no doubting that the restoration of monarchy in the spring of 1660 was welcome to the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of England, Scotland and Ireland. Charles II was popular because he appeared to be all things to all men, promising to heal the wounds that had been bleeding so long and guarantee 'liberty to tender consciences'. So great were the political and religious divisions bequeathed by the upheavals of the 1640s and 50s, however, that it proved impossible to heal the wounds, and in all three kingdoms partisan settlements were worked out in church and state which left winners and losers out of those who had initially welcomed the Restoration. Despite Charles's own irenic intentions, the Cavalier gentry who dominated the English parliament ensured that liberty of conscience would be defeated. Those who refused to conform to a re-established Church of bishops and prayer book would risk not only heavy fines but even imprisonment, transportation and, potentially, death. Charles, to be fair, did try to grant toleration through his prerogative – in 1662 and 1672 – although on both occasions it was clear that a major aim (beyond helping Roman Catholics) was to enhance the authority of the Crown by setting up the prerogative above the law and making dissenters dependent upon royal grace for relief.

In Scotland there were bitter tensions between Presbyterians and Episcopalians. Here Charles restored bishops, where there had hardly been a healthy Episcopalian tradition, in part because bishops afforded the Crown greater control over the Church, and in part because he hated the Scottish Presbyterians whom he held responsible for provoking the crisis that cost his father his life. The laws against dissent in Scotland were even more savage than they were in England, involving not just clerical deprivations and heavy fines, but (from 1670) even death for those who preached at field conventicles (Presbyterian meetings held in the fields). There also remained severe political and religious tensions in Charles's other kingdom, Ireland – though a policy of religious persecution was hardly practicable in a country where three quarters of the population were Catholics, and where even Protestant nonconformists exceeded Protestants of the established Church. Here the main grievance centred on the land settlement, as many Catholics who had been dispossessed by the parliamentary and Cromwellian regimes of the 1640s and 50s were denied the opportunity to stake their claims at a court of law to have their estates restored, once it became apparent that there was not enough land to satisfy all competing interests. As a result, Catholics, who had held some 60 per cent of the profitable land of Ireland in 1641, and whose share had shrunk to a mere 9 per cent under Cromwell, were restored to about 20 per cent under Charles II; to many Protestants in Ireland, however, even this was too much.

On top of this troublesome inheritance, which any ruler would have found difficult to manage, Charles's own failings as king soon became apparent. A seventeenth-century monarch was expected to achieve glory for his nation, defend the true religion (in this context, the Protestant faith), and protect the secular well-being of his subjects (particularly their lives, liberties and estates). In all three respects, Charles's regime fell dramatically short. His foreign policy was most inglorious. A war against the Dutch from 1664 to 1667 (and, from 1666, against the French also) went humiliatingly badly. Much of the English fleet was destroyed and colonial possessions were lost, while in June 1667 came the ultimate disgrace when the Dutch fleet managed to sail up the Medway to Chatham and

destroy four of the biggest vessels of the English navy and capture its flagship, the Royal Charles. A war in alliance with the French against the Dutch in 1672-74 scarcely went any better, and British Protestants began to wonder why their King should be allied with a Catholic superpower against a Protestant neighbour. Nor did it help that Charles seemed soft on Catholics at home and in Ireland when he was seen to be persecuting Protestant nonconformists in England and Scotland.

By the mid-1670s, concern was growing about a drift towards popery and arbitrary government under the Restoration monarchy – a concern shaped not just by developments in England (which historians have done much to trace), but more particularly (and this has usually been missed) by the seeming rise of arbitrary government in Scotland and the increasing indulgence shown towards Catholics in Ireland. What made matters worse was that the heir to the throne – the King's younger brother, James, Duke of York – was a Catholic: what was already happening in Scotland and Ireland would surely become a reality in England, many felt, should the popish heir succeed. Hence the Whig campaign of 1679-81 to exclude York from the succession, a movement which seemed to threaten the very security of the government. It was at the time of the Exclusion Crisis that the labels Whig and Tory were first used in England, with the Whigs being the champions of parliamentary sovereignty and Exclusion and the Tories upholders of divine-right monarchy and indefeasible hereditary succession. Such was the Whig dominance of the Commons that they were effectively able to paralyse government business (even if Charles and his allies in the Lords managed to prevent the passage of an Exclusion Bill). Moreover, they were also able to generate a huge following in the country at large, which they sought to solidify through organized demonstrations (such as the London pope-burning processions of November 17th) and the signing of mass petitions.

The King's strategy in the first two decades of his reign had been to try to stifle public political debate, thus making himself immune to public opinion, and to play different political interests off against each other so as to create a more independent role for the crown. It was clear by 1680 that this strategy had failed. Charles and his advisers therefore changed tack, and deliberately set out to try to court public opinion, in an effort to neutralize the Whig challenge. They did this through a propaganda campaign intended to convince the public that a greater threat to their cherished political and religious freedoms was posed by the Whig Exclusionists and the Protestant nonconformists who, they alleged, threatened to embroil the three kingdoms once more in civil war. In the 1640s this had led to the overthrow of the Protestant established Church, the downfall of the monarchy, and political tyranny (arbitrary government) under Oliver Cromwell and his standing army. Indeed, it was even claimed that by seeking the destruction of the established Church and the Protestant monarchy, the Whigs and nonconformists were effectively seeking the same ends as the Pope. In this way, it was possible to accuse the Whigs of promoting popery and arbitrary government. On the other hand, if one stuck to the existing laws that were designed to protect the existing establishment in church and state, Tories argued, Protestants would be safe even under a Catholic successor.

This ideological counter-offensive appeared to be highly successful in winning back public opinion. Some 212 loyal addresses – from JPs, grand juries, town corporations, and occupational groups from across the country – were delivered to the Crown in the months following the dissolution of the Oxford Parliament of 1681 (summoned to meet at loyalist Oxford to escape the intensely Whiggish environment of the metropolis), and hundreds more followed in 1682 and 1683. There was also a rise in loyal demonstrations (most notably on May 29th, the King's birthday and anniversary of the Restoration, but also on other occasions). However, I use the word 'appeared' advisedly. Some of these addresses and demonstrations were deliberately encouraged by the court: indeed, Charles II even intervened directly himself on occasion, writing to local authorities urging them to promote suitable loyalist displays whenever his brother made a royal entry into a major city (such as London or Edinburgh) and rewarding those who delivered or helped promote loyal addresses with gifts or feasts. The government and Tory press also did their best to highlight loyalist activism while minimizing or even concealing the evidence of continued popular support for the Whigs, thereby enhancing the illusion that public opinion was shifting dramatically in favour of the Crown.

It is true that the loyalist reaction soon developed a momentum of its own, and many addresses and demonstrations were undoubtedly authentic expressions of local loyalist sentiment. But Charles II did not totally win over public opinion, and many people remained alienated. Appearances were what counted. The government was able to show that the Whigs did not speak for the nation, thereby de-legitimizing the Whig claim that Charles should yield to Exclusion because it was what the people wanted. Charles and his advisers knew that they would never win over hardened Whigs and nonconformists. They could, however, encourage latent supporters to declare their sympathies, give silent loyalists the courage to stand up and be counted, and persuade moderates to come off the fence and side with the Crown. In this way they hoped to defuse the potential for popular rebellion: people could be made to see that if they did rebel it would be a risky venture since many others would be against them. Yet Charles also wanted to give local officeholders – whether the landed and mercantile elite who served as JPs, or more humble types who served as trial jurors and parish constables – the courage to act against those whom the government deemed to be its enemies, confident in the belief that the wider community would be behind them in any legal measures they took.

With the Whigs and nonconformists seeming increasingly isolated, Charles then proceeded to purge them from office and to carry out a ruthless legal campaign of repression against all forms of political and religious dissent. It was indeed a clever and subtle strategy, pursued with brilliant success. It even made the drift towards royal absolutism in 1681-85 – and what turned out to be one of the most repressive periods of English history – appear to be in tune with the mood of the nation. Yet Charles achieved what he did by throwing himself into a firm alliance with the Tory-Anglican interest in politics; in that regard, he came close to making the Crown the prisoner of a party.

Charles II was arguably at his most ingenious in the way he made his three-kingdom inheritance work for him. It was an inheritance that had caused significant problems for his grandfather and that had helped precipitate the downfall of his father (as it was also to do for his brother). Charles II made it the source of his salvation. Following his dissolution of the Oxford Parliament in 1681, Charles decided to call a parliament in Scotland, where he felt more confident of the loyalty of the political classes and also of his ability to carry his own legislative agenda. The Scottish Parliament proved true to its trust: in August 1681 it passed a Succession Act which declared that upon the death of the monarch the Crown devolved immediately upon ‘the next Immediat and lauffull heir’ and that ‘no difference in Religion ... nor Act of Parliament’ could alter the succession or debar ‘the next lauffull Successor’. The measure was designed not only to ensure York’s succession to the Scottish crown, but also to make it impossible to contemplate excluding him in England, unless people wanted to expose themselves, as the act put it, ‘to all the fatall and dreadfull consequences of a Civil Warr’.

The genius of Charles II, then, was his ability to appreciate the realities of political power within his multiple kingdom, to work out how to play the system to the best advantage of the Crown, and to recognize the importance of appealing to, and managing, public opinion. All of these had been largely counter-intuitive for most Stuart rulers. Yet it is difficult to celebrate the achievement, given the human suffering it entailed.

The reign had already seen periodic bouts of intense persecution, but its final years were to witness the most sustained period of religious persecution known to English history. Heavy fines were the punishment for attending nonconformist conventicles or for failing to attend church. In Suffolk alone, for example, in May 1685, exchequer processes against Quakers amounted to an astonishing £33,300. Those who could not pay might face imprisonment: according to one Quaker petition, there were 1,460 Friends in prison at the time of the accession of James II. The impact was devastating. Entire families were reduced to poverty, and many were forced to leave their homes and their businesses. Local economies also suffered. In Devon some 500 serge-makers were laid off work when their employers were imprisoned for nonconformity. The conditions in Restoration jails were so bad that those who were sent to them were lucky to come out alive, or if they did, without their health being seriously damaged. In March 1682 it was reported that eighty-six Quakers and fifty-two Presbyterians had lately been committed in Bristol, where they were ‘almost stifled’, being forced ‘to lay upon another, being at least 26 or 30 in a small room’. In 1687 William Penn, the prominent Quaker who was by this time an adviser to James II, put the total of dissenters’ deaths in Restoration jails at around 5,000, although this was undoubtedly an exaggeration. More reliably, the historian of the Quakers W.C. Braithwaite has calculated that about 450 Friends died in custody during the Restoration – and the Quakers were the smallest sect, albeit the best documented one and the one most vulnerable to imprisonment. The New England Puritan divine Cotton Mather claimed that ‘by a modest calculation’ the persecution resulted in ‘the untimely death of 3,000 nonconformists, and the ruin of 60,000 families’ within a twenty-five year period.

Things were even worse in Scotland, where government troops, including the infamous Highland Host, were deployed to brutalize Presbyterians in the south-west, committing acts of theft, pillage, rape and torture, as well as exacting heavy fines. One Presbyterian apologist, writing after the Glorious Revolution, compared the policy to Louis XIV’s dragonnades against the Huguenots in the 1680s and concluded that this was one instance where ‘we were in fashion before France’. A document from August 1684 records fines totalling £274,737 Scots (nearly £23,000 sterling) levied on the heritors of Roxburghshire alone. From late 1684 suspected Presbyterians who refused to take an oath to prove their loyalty could be shot in the field (unless they were women, in which case they were drowned). Perhaps as many as a hundred people were executed in total during what have come to be known as ‘the Killing times’.

If we add to this the various abuses of the law committed by government authorities in dealing with suspected political dissidents, the imposing of excessive fines and bail, and the illegal use of torture north of the border, the England and Scotland of Charles II hardly seems to have been a merry place to have lived for many people. Even in Ireland, where there was nowhere near the same degree of persecution, we must recall how the Catholic majority were denied basic political, economic and legal rights and the justice that they might have expected (especially over the land settlement). Charles II might well be an interesting person to have at a dinner party but if he attended one of mine, I would have many more things I would want to grill him about than titillating tales of his sexual exploits.