

Modern European History

Unit 6 – Revolutions

William of Orange: Protestant Champion

~“*The Liberties of England and the Protestant Religion*”~

motto on the banners of William of Orange when he landed in England (1688)

Directions: Read and annotate the following text:



Portrait of William of Orange by Sir Peter Lely

William of Orange belonged to the royal families of two of the main Protestant powers in 17th century Europe—the Netherlands and England. As a result, he devoted himself to preventing the growth of Catholic France. It was to further that goal that he gladly accepted the offer to become king of England in 1688.

William was born to the house of Orange, a family that had helped the Netherlands win independence in the 1500s. In 1672, France and England invaded this country and William, though only 22 years old, was put in command of its army. The Dutch military had long been neglected, and parts of the country were quickly overrun. In desperation, William ordered the destruction of the dikes, devices that prevented the sea from flowing onto land. By flooding parts of his country, he prevented the advance of the enemy armies.

William then boldly refused a peace offer from England and France. Determined to continue the fight, William worked on two fronts. He strengthened the army while using diplomatic skill to find allies. He won some victories and within a few years forced the French to retreat.

During this time, William married his cousin, Mary. Both were grandchildren of King Charles I of England, and both had a claim to the English throne.

Throughout the early 1680s, William continued his efforts to limit French power. He wanted to ensure the survival of the Netherlands and prevent French religious influence. France was a Catholic nation, and William was the leading Protestant power in Europe. He had hoped to forge an alliance between the Netherlands and England, but the English never agreed to one.

In 1685, James, Mary's father and a Catholic, became king of England. That change brought William new opportunities. English Protestants feared that James would make the country Catholic again. They thought they could use William as a way to stop James. Some hoped that James would remain childless and that William and Mary would produce a son. Their child could be named to follow James on the throne to ensure that England would remain Protestant. Others talked about naming William as a regent to control James. William, who was still seeking an alliance against France, listened to their plans.

In 1688, however, James and his wife had a son, a Catholic heir. A group of Protestant leaders then invited William to come to England and become king immediately. Skillfully avoiding James's strong navy, William crossed the English Channel. He landed with an army of 15,000, declared that a new Parliament should be elected, and easily marched to London. James fled for Europe.

Even then, William and Mary's status was uncertain. Some said that Mary should rule and that William, who was foreign born, should not have any real power. Nevertheless, Mary insisted that they rule together, and they were crowned king and queen. However, Mary died only a few years later.

William ruled both England and the Netherlands until 1702. He spent much of these years leading armies. First, he had to end revolts in Scotland and Ireland. Later, he fought on the continent, continuing his long struggle against France. He had a new cause for war now because Louis XIV of France was trying to put James back on the English throne. In early 1702, William urged Parliament to form

an alliance with the Netherlands against France. While the bill was being debated, William died. Nevertheless, Parliament approved his plan and declared war on France. Parliament added that for the war to end, France must recognize the Protestant succession in England.

“Selections from the Invitation to the Prince of Orange, June 30, 1688”

The following invitation was sent to the Prince of Orange by:

Charles Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury (i.e. 25)

William Cavendish, Earl of Devonshire (i.e. 24)

Thomas Osborne, Earl of Danby (i.e. 27)

Richard Lumley, Lord Lumley (i.e. 29)

Henry Compton, Bishop of London (i.e. 31)

Edward Russell (i.e. 35)

Henry Sidney (i.e. 33)

The first five of these men were members of the House of Lords. Lord Talbot received the title "Duke of Shrewsbury" from the Prince of Orange in 1694. Lord Cavendish had been an advocate of the exclusion of the Duke of York from the succession to the throne; he received the title "Duke of Devonshire" from the Prince of Orange in 1694. Lord Danby received the title "Marquess of Carmarthen" from the Prince of Orange in 1689 and the title "Duke of Leeds" in 1694. Lord Lumley was a famous convert from Catholicism to Protestantism; he received the title "Viscount Lumley" from the Prince of Orange in 1689 and the title "Earl of Scarborough" in 1690. Bishop Compton crowned the Prince and Princess of Orange in 1689. Edward Russell had been in the service of the Prince of Orange since 1683; he received the title "Earl of Orford" from the Prince of Orange in 1695. Henry Sidney had been groom of the bedchamber to James, Duke of York, and master of horse to Anne, Duchess of York; he then served as English envoy to the Hague from 1679 to 1681 and general of the British regiments in the Dutch service from 1681 to 1685; he received the title "Viscount Sidney" from the Prince of Orange in 1689 and the title "Earl of Romney" in 1694.

The "Monsieur Zuylestein" mentioned in the first line of the message is William Henry van Nassau-Zuylestein, the Prince of Orange's first cousin; his father, Frederick van Nassau-Zuylestein, was the illegitimate son of the Prince of Orange's grandfather, Frederick Henry. Zuylestein received the title "Earl of Rochford" from the Prince of Orange in 1695.

The "Mr. H." mentioned at the end of the message is Arthur Herbert. He served as a rear-admiral in the Royal Navy, but was cashiered when he refused to serve with Catholic officers after the Declaration of Indulgence. He commanded the fleet which conveyed the Prince of Orange to England and received the title "Earl of Torrington" from the Prince of Orange in 1689.

... We have great satisfaction to find by 35 [i.e. Russell] and since by Monsieur Zuylestein that Your Highness is so ready and willing to give us such assistance as they have related to us. We have great reason to believe we shall be every day in a worse condition than we are, and less able to defend ourselves, and therefore we do earnestly wish we might be so happy as to find a remedy before it be too late for us to contribute to our own deliverance. But although these be our wishes, yet we will by no means put Your Highness into any expectations which might misguide your own councils in this matter; so that the best advice we can give is to inform Your Highness truly both of the state of things here at this time and of the difficulties which appear to us.

As to the first, the people are so generally dissatisfied with the present conduct of the government in relation to their religion, liberties and properties (all which have been greatly invaded), and they are in such expectation of their prospects being daily worse, that Your Highness may be assured there are nineteen parts of twenty of the people throughout the kingdom who are desirous of a change and who, we believe, would willingly contribute to it, if they had such a protection to countenance their rising as would secure them from being destroyed before they could get to be in a posture to defend themselves. It is no less certain that much the greatest part of the nobility and gentry are as much dissatisfied, although it is not safe to speak to many of them beforehand; and there is no doubt but that some of the most considerable of them would venture themselves with Your Highness at your first landing, whose interests would be able to draw great numbers to them whenever they could protect them and the raising and drawing of men together. And if such a strength could be landed as were able to defend itself and them till they could be got together into some order, we make no question but that strength would quickly be increased to a number double to the army here, although their army should all remain firm to them; whereas we do upon very good grounds believe that their army then would be very much divided among themselves, many of the officers being so discontented that they continue in their service only for a subsistence (besides that some of their minds are known already), and very many of the common soldiers do daily show such an aversion to the popish religion that there is the greatest probability imaginable of great numbers of deserters which could come from them should there be such an occasion; and amongst the seamen it is almost certain there is not one in ten who would do them any service in such a war.

Besides all this, we do much doubt whether the present state of things will not yet be much changed to the worse before another year, by a great alteration which will probably be made both in the officers and soldiers of the army, and by such other changes as are not only to be expected from a packed parliament, but what the meeting of any parliament (in our present circumstances) may produce against those who will be looked upon as principal obstructors of their proceedings there, it being taken for granted that if things cannot then be carried to their wishes in a parliamentary way other measures will be put in execution by more violent means; and although such proceedings will then heighten the discontents, yet such courses will probably be taken at that time as will prevent all possible means of relieving ourselves.

These considerations make us of the opinion that this is a season in which we may more probably contribute to our own safeties than hereafter (although we must own to Your Highness there are some judgments differing from ours in this particular), insomuch that if the circumstances stand so with Your Highness that you believe you can get here time enough, in a condition to give assistances this year sufficient for a relief under these circumstances which have been now represented, we who subscribe this will not fail to attend Your Highness upon your landing and to do all that lies in our power to prepare others to be in as much readiness as such an action is capable of, where there is so much danger in communicating an affair of such a nature till it be near the time of its being made public. But, as we have already told Your Highness, we must also lay our difficulties before Your Highness, which are chiefly that we know not what alarm your preparations for this expedition may give, or what notice it will be necessary for you to give the States beforehand, by either of which means their intelligence or suspicions here may be such as may cause us to be secured before your landing. And we must presume to inform Your Highness that your compliment upon the birth of the child (which not one in a thousand here believes to be the Queen's) hath done you some injury, the false imposing of that upon the princess and the nation being not only an infinite exasperation of people's minds here, but being certainly one of the chief causes upon which the declaration of your entering the kingdom in a hostile manner must be founded on your part, although many other reasons are to be given on ours.

If upon a due consideration of all these circumstances Your Highness shall think fit to adventure upon the attempt, or at least to make such preparations for it as are necessary (which we wish you may), there must be no more time lost in letting us know your resolution concerning it, and in what time we may depend that all the preparations will be ready, as also whether Your Highness does believe the preparations can be so managed as not to give them warning here, both to make them increase their force and to secure those they shall suspect would join with you. We need not say anything about ammunition, artillery, mortar pieces, spare arms, etc., because if you think fit to put anything in execution you will provide enough of these kinds, and will take care to bring some good engineers with you; and we have desired Mr. H[erbert] to consult you about all such matters, to whom we have communicated our thoughts in many particulars too tedious to have been written, and about which no certain resolutions can be taken till we have heard again from Your Highness.