

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

# A FAILED REPUBLIC

THE church had gone. The king had gone. To those in the vanguard of sweeping away these institutions such acts prefaced the new age of the spirit. The prophecies read about in Daniel and in the Book of Revelation were being fulfilled here and now, and Christ's kingdom on earth was imminent. His way, however, needed to be prepared with acts of government which would create a godly society, one which was upright, moral and devout. The extreme Protestant sects which proliferated during these years lived in an aura of perpetual expectancy of the Second Coming, or millenarianism, as it was called. All over the country ordinary people were caught up in waves of religious hysteria producing a society which was the reverse of that which the rule of Elizabeth I had striven to achieve half-a-century before, one which ensured stability and order in both church and state and in which each man knew his place.

As a consequence this was a decade not of hope but of fear. The lynch-pins of the old social structure in which king, nobility and gentry had shared power and office had gone. For the first time since the Peasants' Revolt the submerged remainder of the population raised its head, threatening both property and status. Much of the old infrastructure of ordinary daily life as it had been known to everyone had already been, or was about to be, swept away. Simple rustic pleasures such as May Day and the revelry of the Twelve Days of Christmas were forbidden.

All over the country society was dislocated leading to riots and disturbances. The general sense of despair was not helped either by the worst commercial slump of the century or harvests wrecked by torrential rain. Depressed, disillusioned, and often dispossessed, more people emigrated to the newly-founded colonies of New England than at any other period till the nineteenth century.

But for those at the centre of things it was a time for rejoicing as they hailed the dawn of a new age. Parliament was now free to set up whatever form of government it thought conducive to the rule of the saints. Those members still left, the Rump, had travelled a long way since they first met in 1641. What they still retained, however, was their allegiance to their class, the gentry, viewing with deep misgivings the

widespread demands for social reform from the sects, fearing also an election because of its uncertain consequences. Their attitudes are caught early on in the suppression of the Levellers, and later the re-introduction of press censorship to stem the flood of what they regarded as subversive ideas. If they had a model towards which they looked it was Venice, a stable republic for centuries but of a very particular kind, one which made sure that the right to vote and hold office was confined only to a closed circle of rich mercantile families.

In February 1649 the monarchy and the House of Lords were abolished. On 13 February a Council of State was set up, elected from the Commons, to govern the country. In May, England was declared to be 'a commonwealth and free state' under God. A new constitution was now in place. What was lacking was a government which had a clear policy as to the direction in which things should go.

For the time being Cromwell's New Model Army, having seemingly achieved its political objective, was quiescent. In July it crossed the sea to deal with the Catholic Irish. To the army this was living the apocalypse. They were the forces of Christ sent to smite those of Antichrist. Pity or compassion of any kind had no place and the inhabitants of Drogheda and Wexford were mercilessly put to the sword. The devastation did not stop there, for the army went on, under Henry Ireton, to destroy every building and burn the crops in the fields, starving the country into submission. Almost half the population perished, and Cromwell left behind him a living legend of horror.

In the spring of the following year Parliament began to set about passing acts to create the society of the saints. The death penalty was introduced for fornication, adultery, swearing and blasphemy. The courts, however, never implemented it. Parliament then demanded that all adult males swear an oath of loyalty to the new regime, the Engagement. This was a gigantic blunder, for all over England people refused and lost office forming thereby a substantial group opposed to the new government.

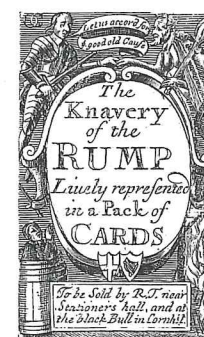
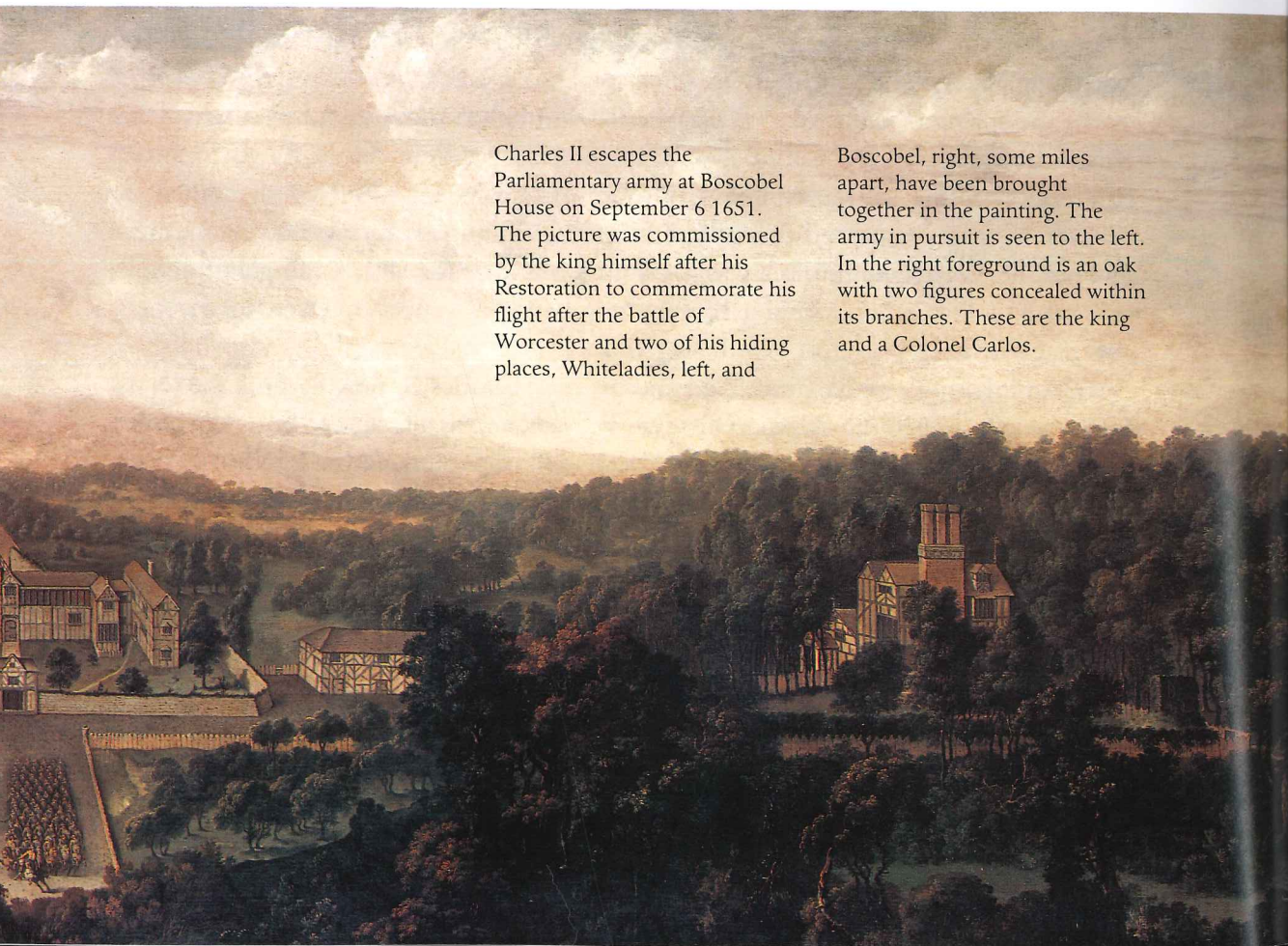
The king in one sense never died and his heir, Charles II, now became the focus for those still loyal to the Royalist cause or who saw him as a means to bring down the new republic. Amongst these were the Scottish Covenanters who wished to impose their strict form of Presbyterianism on England. Charles II, like his father before him, loathed them, but the end justified the means. Cromwell and his army had no sooner returned from Ireland than they set off to defeat the Scots, which they did at the Battle of Dunbar in which three thousand Covenanters were slain and ten thousand infantry taken prisoner. The leader of the Scots, Alexander Leslie, was resourceful and retreated to defensive positions in the highlands. Charles II went on to be crowned

king of Scotland and, in the following year, crossed the border with a Scottish army. He found little support along the way from a war-weary people faced with yet another Scottish army traipsing southwards. Devoid of the hoped-for Royalist uprisings Charles abandoned his march against London and headed westwards, towards the old Royalist heartlands. Cromwell, too, marched swiftly south and, on the anniversary of the Battle of Dunbar, routed the Royalist army at Worcester. The king narrowly escaped capture and eventually made his way into exile.

Given the composition of the Rump government and the expectations of it in the world outside it was doomed to failure. The Rump was made up of property-owning country gentry and lawyers, hardly likely to embrace with enthusiasm radical reforms which would threaten and change their own status so dramatically. Any extension of the franchise would erode their privilege. Equally, although a commission on legal reform produced many recommendations, they were not implemented. In the case of religion there was again inertia. Plans were made to re-draw the parish boundaries to ensure that everyone was within reach of a church every three miles, but again the proposals crossed too many vested interests. The Rump's only achievement was a commission set up to spread the light of the gospel in what was seen as Royalist and

Charles II escapes the Parliamentary army at Boscobel House on September 6 1651. The picture was commissioned by the king himself after his Restoration to commemorate his flight after the battle of Worcester and two of his hiding places, Whiteladies, left, and

Boscobel, right, some miles apart, have been brought together in the painting. The army in pursuit is seen to the left. In the right foreground is an oak with two figures concealed within its branches. These are the king and a Colonel Carlos.



After the Restoration there was a card game based on the history of the Rump Parliament. Oliver Cromwell makes a pact with the Devil and the rest follows.

Catholic Wales and the north. But even this foundered within a few years, although the success of the Welsh venture can be measured by the long dissenting tradition. Indeed the only major reform carried through was due to pressure from the army in the aftermath of Dunbar, when an act established liberty of conscience and abolished compulsory church attendance each Sunday.

There was another reason for lack of policy, lack of money. In spite of the weight of taxation the government's financial plight was disastrous. All its funds were eaten up paying for the civil wars and the army. Everything that could be sold was sold: the cathedrals, the royal palaces, the king's fabulous art collection, what little remained of the crown lands, along with lands which had belonged to deans and chapters, to bishops and dispossessed Royalists. So bad was the financial situation that the excise tax was being anticipated four years in advance.

All of this was exacerbated by a foreign war with the Dutch. Next to agriculture anything to do with the sea or shipping was England's greatest industry. With their vast fleet, the Dutch were taking over the carrying trade both in the Baltic and in the American colonies. An act was passed laying down that henceforth all imports had to be either in English ships or in those of the country of origin. War broke out in 1652

and went successfully for the English, but it was expensive. Although bankruptcy beckoned, the rulers of the Commonwealth still believed that they were riding on the crest of the wave.

What they had failed to take into account was the army. Whereas the Rump drifted towards conservatism, especially in matters of religion, the core of the army maintained its zeal as a radical force whose chosen leader was King Jesus and which saw events in terms of the apocalypse. So the Rump was viewed more and more by the army with distrust and disfavour, as a body not advancing but actually holding back the rule of the saints. After his customary weeks of 'waiting on the Lord' Cromwell angrily called on his troops and dissolved the Rump of the Long Parliament on 20 April 1653.

Once again there was a political vacuum in which ideas ran riot as to which direction the country should take in preparation for the coming of Christ. Cromwell's solution was an assembly nominated by the officers of the army. Its task was to carry through the reforms deemed necessary to ensure the godliness of the people. That group of a hundred and forty-four men was satirised as the Barebones Parliament, taking its name from the leather-seller and radical Praise-God Barebones, who headed the list of its members. For the first time the assembly included nominees from Scotland and Ireland. The atmosphere with which this body opened on 4 July 1653 was one of millenary fervour. Their role, Cromwell informed them, was to refashion the moral fabric of society in preparation for a return to normal parliaments: 'Truly you are called by God to rule with Him, and for Him.'

The new assembly set about its task with energy, and a whole spate of legislation followed, uniting the three countries, introducing civil marriages, reforms in the law, challenging the tithe system and the right of lay presentation to church livings. As its work progressed there were those amongst its members who began to see its programme taking away from them long-held rights. Moderate opinion became frightened that property and society as they knew it were in danger. Towards the end of 1653 the commissions of peace in the counties were changed. Justices of the Peace who had supported the Rump were ejected and for the first time yeomen and shopkeepers appeared. The rot set in when time-honoured perquisites of the gentry classes were seen to pass into the hands of social inferiors. There were those in the Barebones Parliament too who were Fifth Monarchists and their egalitarianism equally sounded the alarm bells. So, early on the morning of 12 December a group of the moderates carried the day and voted for the return of power back to the army, and to its leader, Oliver Cromwell. England's brief experiment with republicanism had come to an end.