

## Chapter Forty-Two

# THE UNEXPECTED REVOLUTION

CHARLES II died on the morning of 6 February 1685 leaving fourteen illegitimate children, the progeny of a roll call of extravagant mistresses, but no heir by his wife. His last years had seen the monarchy resurgent. Although bound to summon a Parliament within each three-year period, 1684 had passed without one and no protest had been voiced. The year before a plot in which some of the more extreme of the Whigs had been involved, the Rye House Plot, had planned the assassination of both royal brothers, and generated another floodtide of devotion to the crown. There was little to suggest that the accession of James, Duke of York, as king would signal any dramatic change of direction. Indeed the Parliament which had to be summoned to vote the royal finances for the reign was Tory almost to a man.

James II, however, was a very different character from his brother. Where Charles had been dark, James was fair. Where Charles had been endowed with an endearing common touch, James was devoid of warmth and exuded a cold regal hauteur. In his portraits he looks down on, rather than out at, the spectator. As a military man and as Lord High Admiral he believed in iron discipline, and that the prime role of those below was to obey unquestioningly. In addition, he shared with his father an unswerving belief in the divinity of kings. Whilst Duke of York he had married a daughter of the Earl of Clarendon, Anne Hyde, by whom he had two daughters, Mary and Anne. Both had been brought up as Protestants but their mother, a year before her death, became Catholic, followed shortly after by her husband, the event which, when it came to light, had precipitated the Exclusion Crisis. James eventually let Louis XIV choose him a bride, an Italian Catholic princess, Mary of Modena.

James's overt commitment to the Catholic cause was to be his ruin. If he had remained Anglican, history would have taken a different direction, for a monarchy firmly in alliance with the Church of England and the Royalist Tories in the shires would probably have

The grand formality of royal portraiture in the baroque age reflects accurately the aloofness characteristic of James II.





succeeded in transforming the country along the lines of the French monarchy into an absolutist state. But such a transformation depended on support which, on account of his religious commitment, James progressively eroded. What is astonishing is that he was able to take his personal policy so far and that it was not to be until the spring of 1688 that matters came to a head. The reason for the delay was fear, fear of a repetition of the years after 1642. The monarchy had returned in 1660 as the only means to sustain social order and ensure the hold on power of the landed gentry classes. It was only when James ruthlessly proceeded to dislodge them from office in favour of Catholics and Dissenters that the spell was broken.

One thought above every other dominated the king – how to make England safe for Catholics and how, in the longer term, to convert the country back to Rome. To move things in that direction would have called for phenomenal tact and patience. Unfortunately the king was endowed with neither. What was more, anti-Catholicism had gone through one of its wildest irrational outbursts only five years earlier in the aftermath of the Popish Plot. In France, Louis XIV had expelled half-a-million Protestants in the interests of creating a wholly Catholic state. Many of them had come to England, not only bringing welcome commercial skills but also adding to the fear as to what could take place if James pursued a similar policy.

In order to achieve his objective James had to ensure that candidates of his own choosing were not only in control of central and local government but would be elected to Parliament. That process of royal infiltration had already been started by Charles II during his last years but under James it was to be all too visibly accelerated. Such a policy was a move in the direction of absolute rule and carried with it the demotion of the Church of England from its place of privilege. In addition, in order to achieve his religious ends, it meant removing from office the very people who had brought him to the throne, the Tory Anglican Royalists. It was fatally short-sighted of James.

Luck was with him at first. In 1685, an illegitimate son of Charles II, James, Duke of Monmouth, challenged his right to the throne as a candidate of the fallen Whigs. He landed in the south-west and attracted a large following amongst those who feared the king's popery. Although Monmouth took Taunton, the government doubled the size of the army and routed the rebels at Sedgemoor. They were savagely put down and Monmouth was executed. By James, this victory was read as the judgment of God.

The army was not dispersed but kept standing. It numbered twenty thousand in all. A large standing army was one of the chief mainstays of any absolute monarch and its continued existence provoked a sense of nervous unease. That might have

evaporated if the king had not dispensed over sixty of its officers, who were Catholic, from submitting to the Test Acts, which prohibited Catholics from holding crown office. In one case that right was tried in the law courts. To meet such contingencies James had continued his brother's policy of removing all judges who would oppose the royal will. As a consequence the crown won the case, but it was clear to everyone that the law had been bent.

Gradually central government began to be purged of moderates and an inner Catholic ring of ministers and advisers was brought in. To the people, the erection of a spectacular Catholic chapel in Whitehall Palace to which both the king and queen went in pomp to hear mass, must have seemed quite astonishing. Until that time, the Catholic chapels of the Stuart queens had been discreet, hidden affairs. Now the Catholic faith in all its colourful baroque splendour was seen at the heart of the life of the court. Although Charles II had from time to time tried to use his royal right to dispense in attempts to introduce religious toleration for both Catholics and Dissenters, he had failed. James II was to use that right with far greater frequency to achieve precisely that end. In 1686 he used it to forbid clergy to preach anything controversial or seditious, by which he meant any attack on those outside the Church of England. When one cleric offended, Henry Compton, the Bishop of London, refused to suspend him. The king set up a special Commission for Ecclesiastical Causes, and it suspended both. James believed that the church was now silenced and would continue in its role of preaching obedience to the crown from the pulpit.

Having introduced Catholics into the army and into central government James's next move was to place them in the localities. In January 1687 five hundred new Justices of the Peace were appointed, over sixty per cent of whom were Catholic. Once again, the king made use of his dispensing right to remove from the Catholics any obligation to swear the Oaths of Allegiance and Supremacy. Three months later he issued a Declaration of Indulgence suspending both the penal laws against Catholics and Dissenters and the Test Acts. More and more people looked on aghast at the drift of events, but there was no sign of organised opposition.

The king had stated that he would gain parliamentary approval for the Declaration which meant that he had to be certain of a massive majority of members would vote in its favour. To achieve that meant a purge not only of local government, but also of the towns. By March 1688 some twelve hundred people had been removed from office and replaced by Catholics and Dissenters. There was, however, still no sign of public resistance. What the king would have read as acquiescence was in fact alienation. That meant that if there was a challenge of some kind whoever made it could rely on the passivity of the majority, who would not rise in the king's defence.

Obedience and non-resistance to the crown was part of the creed of the Tories. And James had lost their support. He had violated those who would have sustained him in power. The Church of England by the Declaration was seen to be reduced to the level of a competing sect. Worse, James had dissolved the alliance of monarchy and church by turning to those outside it, Catholics and Dissenters. Parliamentary powers had been reduced seemingly to an irrelevance by his use of the royal right to dispense. And all over the country there had been a repetition of what had happened under the Commonwealth, many of the most powerful men in each of the shires, knights and baronets, the old cavalier gentry, had been removed in favour of Catholics and Dissenters, often of inferior social status.

Everything was in place for a bid to be made to turn the tide but there was no thought as yet of replacing the king. His wife, Mary of Modena, had remained childless and his heir was his eldest daughter, Mary, staunchly Anglican, who had been married to the ruler of the Protestant Netherlands, William of Orange. No one in the spring of 1688 could have predicted that by the close of the year James would have fled, and that William and Mary would have replaced him as joint sovereigns. That was not in anyone's mind when members of the English nobility began to make overtures to William to intervene.

That request was to reach a crescendo during the summer. In April the king issued a second Declaration of Indulgence. Seven bishops headed by William Sancroft, Archbishop of Canterbury, refused to instruct their clergy to read it from the pulpit and went on to challenge its legality. The king ordered their arrest on 8 June. They were brought to trial and, on 30 June, were acquitted. The City of London, a bulwark of Protestantism, went wild with rejoicing. On that same evening a formal letter of invitation was sent to William of Orange asking that he invade the country. Even then it is remarkable how few of the nobility actually signed it. That letter was also prompted by the birth on 10 June of a Prince of Wales. For the first time it was clear that James's reign would not be an aberration but that he could be the first of a line of Catholic kings of Great Britain.

Across the Channel in the Netherlands a large army and fleet began to be assembled. It did not cross the minds of either James or his ministers that it was destined for England until the middle of August. They believed that it was in readiness for yet another phase in the struggle of the Dutch against Louis XIV. And in one sense they were correct, for William's interest in England was motivated by precisely that, the need for the country to play the role both Charles and James had abrogated, to lead Europe against France. That need for the wealth and power of England to be part of the coalition was the unwritten scenario behind William's

Declaration of 30 September in which he listed publicly his reasons for intervening. These included the removal of 'evil counsellors', that is the Catholics, the re-introduction of the Test Acts, the settlement of the problem of dissent and, above all, the election of a free and lawful Parliament. Among these reasons there was one statement which suggested that a change of ruler was in the air. The baby Prince of Wales, on no creditable evidence whatsoever, was declared an impostor smuggled into the queen's bedroom.



A Dutch satirical print on the birth of a Prince of Wales to James II and Mary of Modena. The propaganda machine of William of Orange built on the popular belief that the child was a miller's son smuggled into the queen's bedroom, hence the windmill in the child's hand.

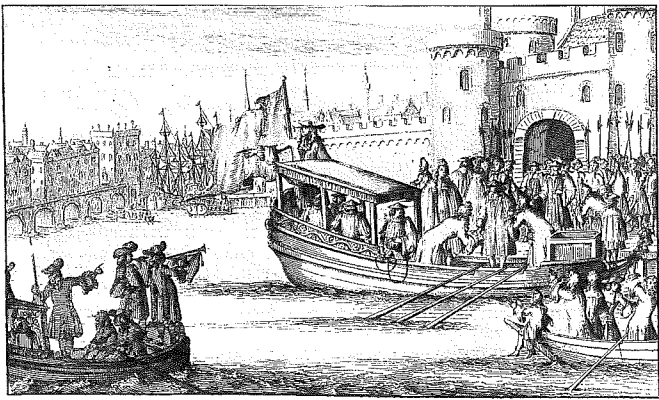
In England panic at last set in, but it came too late. Luck was on William's side virtually the entire time during the bizarre events which ran their course through the autumn months. James refused help from the French, who completely misjudged the situation, and stood by while their pensioner forfeited his throne which passed to their deadliest foe. James too believed that William would never attack his own father-in-law, let alone send an army and a fleet across the Channel during the turbulent

months of the onset of winter. So it was not until the end of September that the king accepted the fact that England was to be invaded. The result was a precipitate rush of concessions. Things like the Ecclesiastical Commission were abolished, and the campaign to gain control of the towns by means of new charters was thrown into the melting-pot. Even the writs for a general election were suddenly withdrawn. Government had lost its nerve and that was fatal, for the king was still powerful. In spite of the defection of some of the army the majority of it remained intact. Nor were there any signs of overt rebellion in the regions.

The invasion was held up on account of the weather. The original intention had been to land in Yorkshire and march south but instead the fleet landed in the south-west at Torbay. The royal army meanwhile had advanced on Salisbury. But instead of leading his troops directly into battle, James delayed, facilitating further desertions to the enemy. The king, who three years earlier had seen God as being on his side, now disintegrated. Physically wracked – from a violent nose bleed – he gave way to depression and returned to London without fighting. The result was disaster.

On his return James learnt that his second daughter, Anne, had deserted him. He sent commissioners to deal with William, who demanded the removal of all Catholics from office and that the king should summon a free Parliament. Meanwhile his thoughts turned to flight. That of his queen and son was the first to be achieved, and then on 11 December he fled Whitehall by means of a secret passage and made his way to the coast, where he was recognised and escorted back to London which had already opened its gates to William. James refused every proposal and was escorted to Rochester. On 22 December he made a second, and this time successful, attempt to flee the country, largely because at William's connivance no attempt was made to stop him. William of Orange was not yet king, nor was there any mention of it, but with James gone he alone

More Dutch propaganda prints telling the story of the invasion of William III and the flight of James II. The leaders of the Church of England had refused to read James II's Declaration of Indulgence permitting liberty of conscience in the churches. Seven of them, who petitioned the king to withdraw the order, were arrested and sent to the Tower of London. Here they are depicted as martyrs for the Protestant faith.



held all the cards ensuring the stability of life and property. In short, England had been conquered by a foreign army for the second time since 1066. The difference this time was that the conquest was to be a bloodless one.

A hasty election was then called and there was a replay in many ways of the events which prefaced the Restoration. Once again there was a Convention Parliament, for no monarch had summoned it. This met on 22 January when both Whigs and Tories discussed the implications of the king's flight. Once more fear of violence and rebellion was at the heart of what followed. No one wished for a recurrence of the 1650s. The problem was how to make legal William's seizure of power by force of arms. On 6 February Parliament voted that the throne was vacant and that the king, through fleeing, had abdicated. Shades of the Whig arguments from the period of the Exclusion Crisis now re-surfaced. A Catholic king and his heir were excluded and Parliament offered the crown to Mary and William jointly, although William had no claim to it whatsoever, except by dint of his marriage and military victory. By then William would accept nothing less. Together the new king and queen were presented to the nation as the country's saviours from popery and arbitrary rule.

That it was a bloodless change of regime was due not only to James's failure to go to battle but also to the quiescence of the Anglican Tory gentry who may not have welcomed a foreign king but certainly saw him as the only option open to guarantee their continued hold on political power. The governing élite had reasserted their role in 1660. They had reasserted it again in 1688. It was to remain unassailed for almost a century and a half, despite the fact that 1688 also marked the beginning of the years of Jacobite threat. Gilbert Burnet, Bishop of Salisbury, who had accompanied William of Orange on his invasion of England rightly designated it 'the unexpected revolution'.

A popular double portrait of William III and Mary II on an English Delftware plate of 1690. English tin-glazed earthenware followed Dutch styles. The queen indeed set a fashion for blue and white Delftware in interior decoration.

