

Notes on England in the seventeenth century.

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INTRODUCTION: Britain in transition

Great Britain in 1714 was a very different place from the England and Scotland of 1603.

Until the death of Elizabeth the two realms had been entirely separate.

They were ruled by different dynasties, in accordance with different constitutional principles; their legal systems were different and their churches quite distinct.

1603 saw a union of the Crowns, but it was a purely personal union.

In spite of some determined efforts on James's part, the English parliament resisted a full constitutional assimilation.

Scotland retained its own Privy Council and parliament, but its king became an absentee since all the Stuarts chose to govern from Westminster.

It was not until **1707**, when political and economic circumstances – particularly the latter – were favourable, that the Scottish parliament could be persuaded to vote its own dissolution.

It was at that point, when Scotland began to send its Members of Parliament to London, that the United Kingdom became Great Britain.

Political Union, however, was not the whole story.

Constitutionally there was now one realm, and Scotland accepted the Hanoverian succession in 1714, but culturally it remained quite distinct.

Scotland had adopted the Roman law in the sixteenth century, and never accepted the English Common Law which prevailed in both Wales and Ireland.

The reformed Kirk had taken its doctrine and its system of government directly from Geneva in the 1570s, and was governed by a General Assembly and a hierarchy of synods.

The Royal Supremacy was not recognised in Scotland, and attempts by both James I and Charles I to impose a measure of uniformity with England were bitterly resented and successfully resisted.

Loyalty to the Stuart dynasty, exiled since the protestant coup against James II in 1689, lingered strongly into the 18th century and the **Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745** were much more strongly supported in North Britain than in South.

After the latter rising the Gaelic speaking clansmen of the north and west were a suppressed minority, but they had not been a major element in the Scottish polity since the fifteenth century.

The union of the Crowns had also had other consequences, because it had been Scottish ideas of monarchy which first set the Stuarts at odds with the political elite of England.

James was accustomed to a situation in which high theories of the Divine Right of Kings could be indulged in as a private luxury, because the real power of the Crown of Scotland was circumscribed by nobles, by the Kirk and by its own poverty.

James saw the comparative wealth of the English monarchy, and the power of the Royal Supremacy as means of emancipation.

It took him some time to realise that the customary restrictions under which English kings had governed for many years were now embodied in the institution of parliament.

He quickly appreciated that the English peerage was nothing like as strong, either individually or collectively, as its Scottish counterpart, but failed for some time to understand the collective strength of the House of Commons, or of the Common lawyers of whom it was largely composed.

In seeking to emancipate his prerogative from restraint, he blundered into all sorts of intangible obstacles which were nowhere written down, but which Elizabeth had avoided as though by instinct because she understood the system.

While James became more pragmatic with time, and was always politically shrewd, his son Charles was neither.

Charles had an intellectual horror of the indeterminate, and set out to govern in accordance with the theory of English monarchy rather than the practice.

Charles attempt to rule without parliament from 1629 to 1640, while perfectly proper in principle, showed a crass misunderstanding of political reality.

Forced into humiliating retreat by a combination of English and Scottish intransigence, he took the enormous risk of seeking to convert his opponents into traitors by taking up arms against them.

The resulting civil war demonstrated that traditional loyalty to the crown was no match for the religious and constitutional ideas which had been growing in political power for half a century.

Defeated in the field by a combination of the financial muscle of the city of London and the military ability of Oliver Cromwell, he refused the opportunity of an honest compromise which would have resulted in a much diminished (and defined) prerogative.

Unable to make an honest surrender against his principles, Charles forced his opponents into the uncharted (and unsought) waters of republicanism.

Without any kind of traditional mandate, they cut off his head and abolished the monarchy.

This was the ultimate demonstration of accountability, and neither English nor Scottish government would ever be the same again.

For eleven years England and Scotland were run as a single republic by a regime made legitimate by the swords of its victorious army.

Various constitutional devices were experimented with, and the established church was abolished in both kingdoms, but tradition proved to be too strong and the building blocks of a viable republic were simply not in place.

Oliver Cromwell, who became Chief Executive with the title of Lord Protector, simply ran out of ideas, & the more like a king he became, the less justification there was for his regime.

When he died in 1659 his son Richard fell out with the army, and the leaders of the latter negotiated the return of the king.

Charles II was restored, but **not** the monarchy to which his father had aspired.

Charles was quite shrewd enough to understand the significance of what had happened, and although he was able to use his natural intelligence to secure some freedom for his prerogative, he knew that ultimately he was answerable to the parliament.

He was able to ride on Anglican and royalist enthusiasm for a number of years, but both his religious and his foreign policy became intensely controversial, and, being a man of much greater flexibility than his father, he backed down.

He had no desire to test the limits of accountability a second time.

His one unequivocal victory came at the expense of those who tried to use parliament to exclude his brother James from the succession on the grounds that he was a catholic. Belatedly, legitimacy won a victory over religious principle.

It turned out to be a hollow victory, because when James succeeded in 1685, instead of keeping quiet about his faith, he flaunted it in the most clumsy and provocative fashion.

Even the pope was worried, and the English political nation became thoroughly alienated. Invoking the principle of accountability a second time, they invited his daughter Mary and her Dutch husband, William of Orange to intervene.

William, who was locked in conflict with James's friend, Louis XIV of France, seized his opportunity.

A second civil war was only avoided when James ran away, and could conveniently be deemed to have abdicated.

Although a detritus of Stuart loyalists in the form of High Tories and non-jurors remained behind, William and Mary were accepted by the vast majority of the political nation.

The so called 'Glorious Revolution' was the second and final test of the constitutional accountability of the English Crown, and was (rather surprisingly) accepted in Scotland without demur.

Although there was a nod in the direction of legitimacy involved in the acceptance of Mary, and later of her sister Anne, in 1701 it was established by the Act of settlement that the parliament of England could, in effect, appoint anyone it liked to be king.

In this case it settled on George of Hanover, the great grandson of James I via his mother Sophia, the daughter of Elizabeth ‘the winter Queen’.

The religious and political will of the nation, as transmitted by parliament was thus demonstrated to be the ultimate power in England, and the monarch was reduced to the level of a Chief Executive.

Ireland Although sometimes extremely dramatic, events in Ireland had little impact on the wider realm.

The future of the country had been settled for the next two hundred years by the final **submission of the earl of Tyrone in March 1603.**

Thereafter Ireland was a colony (or more accurately a collection of colonies) & was governed as such.

The Catholic rebellion of 1641 helped to tip England into Civil war, but was not decisive, and the brutal exploits of the New Model army merely served to enforce the English and protestant ascendancy.

The Catholicism of the native Irish was a constant source of worry to the English government, but apart from the fact that James II came back to make his last stand at the Boyne in 1690, was not of great importance.

James’s cause was lost by then anyway, and if it had not entered into Ulster folklore, the battle would long since have been forgotten.

The long seventeenth century thus saw four staging posts in the formation of modern Britain.

First the union of the Crowns of England and Scotland in 1603;

Second the ultimate test of political accountability provided by the Civil war and the execution of the King;

Thirdly the lower key, but none the less decisive account demanded of James II in 1689; and

Fourthly the Act of Union between England and Scotland in 1707.

Without the civil war, an absolutist system of government on the French model might well have become established in England, and it was fear of a similar kind of irresponsibility which led to the deposition of James II in 1689.

Without the Act of Union the Great Britain of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would never have been formed, and the British Empire of that period would never have come into existence – or at least it would have been very different.