

Historical overview

The monarchy, 1660–1745: Restoration, renovation or innovation?

Charles II's arrival in England (from exile in France) and his subsequent accession as king in May 1660 are taken as the beginning of a new period in English history: the Restoration. With Charles II on the throne, England had a king for the first time in eleven years, ending the period between kings, known by its Latinate name, the Interregnum. In the process, the lineage of the Stuarts was restored to the English monarchy, their position there having been severed by an executioner's axe in 1649. Thus, 1660 saw a Restoration in several senses. Both monarchy and the particular family of the preceding monarch were restored. At the same time, though, the concept of Restoration more broadly was equally important for England in the 1660s. The Restoration of Charles II ended nearly two decades of Civil Wars across England and army coups at Parliament in London. The numerous bonfires seen by Samuel Pepys as he stood on London Bridge in February 1660 indicated a profound hope that peace might be restored along with Charles. In this way, 'The Restoration' is the name of a period and of an act that initiated a lengthy process of attempting to address the causes and consequences of the Civil Wars. For the next quarter-century, until his death in 1685, Charles II would provide England with stability at the top of the political system. Therefore, this historical overview of the period will begin with political history, reviewing the monarchy and its relationship with Parliament in the decades from 1660 to the middle of the eighteenth century, precisely because the return of the King to the throne gave the period its name, and also gave a high political cast to much that was written about it from that time on.

Upon his return to England and his Restoration to the throne, and although welcomed after some of the excesses of the Interregnum governments, Charles II ruled without the various causes of British political instability having been resolved. There were still conflicts between the three kingdoms, radical differences in religious and political affiliation and an international chess match of colonial expansion still unfolding. In the twentieth century, almost three hundred years after the return of Charles, T. S. Eliot would argue, suggestively, that 'The Civil War is not ended' ('Milton II' p. 148 [A]). In 1660, the question, in the aftermath of the Civil Wars and the Interregnum, was whether the Restoration could overcome the destabilising effects of that earlier, defining upheaval. As it turned out, new versions of the old debates over the relationship between religious and political diversity would persist and events repeatedly provoked questions over the permanency of the restoration (in its broadest sense). In events such as the Exclusion Crisis (1678–81), the Glorious Revolution (1688),

the Act of Settlement (1701), the accession of George I (1714), and the Jacobite Rebellions by supporters of Stuart monarchy (1689, 1715 and 1745), we can see a repeated pattern of concern over the religion of the King, and over the relationship between the various kingdoms united by the Stuarts. At the same time, the relatively peaceable treatment of these issues during and after the Restoration contrasts with their handling in the 1640s and 1650s, leading some historians to talk about this period in terms of a growth in political stability.

Restoration

In the Declaration at Breda (1660) made prior to his being offered the monarchy, Charles II recognised 'liberty to tender consciences'. That is, Charles granted religious toleration, which was the watchword of the radical Protestants who had played such an important role in the 1640s (most importantly within Cromwell's New Model Army). But Parliament was not ready to make such a grant, and in 1662 they passed the Act of Uniformity, which required, among other things, that ministers agree to an Episcopalian form of church government (with bishops running the Church, as opposed to a 'Presbyterian' form run by the congregations' memberships). The theological differences between the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians were compounded by the differences between the three kingdoms that were combined by the Stuarts: Ireland had a majority Roman Catholic population administered by an Anglican settler minority; Scotland had a Presbyterian church structure, and was not tolerant of other religions; and England had an

Historiography of seventeenth-century English politics

The five decades between 1640 and 1689 are among the richest in British political history. The execution of one king, the creation of a commonwealth, the Restoration of the family deposed at the execution, the failed bid to block the next person in line in that family, his tumultuous term as monarch, and his flight to France make for an extraordinarily complicated period. The record of historians on the period – its historiography – is equally dense as well. How one tells the story can automatically, even if unintentionally, align one with one or the other side of events. As this historiography also creates its own context for understanding the literature of the period, it is important to have at least a schematic sense of it too. In the nineteenth century, historians treated the Civil Wars of the 1640s as a Puritan revolution, and the Revolution of 1688 as 'Glorious'. By the mid-twentieth century, Marxist historians downplayed the role of religion and read the same events in terms of changes in modes of production (from feudal farming to early modern mercantilism), and related conflicts between classes (represented, for example, by the Lords and the Commons). More recently, the religious variety of the period has been recovered and reasserted against both the nineteenth-century vision of a single monolithic 'Puritan' opposition and the Marxist vision of an economic struggle. Some have argued that there was no revolution at all in the seventeenth century, while others have pointed to the relatively narrow band within which religious disagreements occurred. An important development over the past few decades has been to see the seventeenth century internationally, first as a war of three kingdoms, then as part of a larger European conflict and, most recently, globally, in relation to European colonial ventures largely in the Americas. There is probably a complicated calculus that could represent the new possibilities of a synthetic approach: wars within and among three kingdoms in which differences among the religious perspectives of the participants reflect and shape differing attitudes towards increasing modernity. By the early eighteenth century, as positions are consolidated and political parties coalesce, the work of roughly contemporary authors such as Defoe, Pope and Swift will create the impression of a correlation between at least some of these variables.