

The English Civil War



A single monarch

Elizabeth I, the last of the Tudor monarchs, died in 1603 and the thrones of England and Ireland passed to her cousin, James Stuart.

Thus James VI of Scotland also became James I of England. The three separate kingdoms were united under a single ruler for the first time, and James I and VI, as he now became, entered upon his unique inheritance.

James had awaited Elizabeth's death with eager anticipation, because of the wealth and prestige the English crown would bring him. But, as this canny monarch must have known all too well, the balancing act he would henceforth be required to perform was not an easy one.

England, Scotland and Ireland were very different countries, with very different histories, and the memories of past conflict between those countries - and indeed, of past conflict between different ethnic groups within those countries - ran deep.

To make matters trickier still, each kingdom favoured a different form of religion. Most Scots were Calvinists, most English favoured a more moderate form of Protestantism and most Irish remained stoutly Catholic. Yet each kingdom also contained strong religious minorities.

In England, the chief such group were the Catholics, who initially believed that James would prove less severe to them than Elizabeth had been.

When these expectations were disappointed, Catholic conspirators hatched a plot to blow both the new king and his parliament sky-high.

The discovery of the Gunpowder Plot served as a warning to James, if any were needed, of the very grave dangers religious divisions could pose, both to his own person and to the stability of his triple crown.

Charles I

James I was resolved to keep his kingdoms out of foreign entanglements if he could. However - following the marriage of his daughter Elizabeth to Frederick V, elector of the Rhineland Palatinate; Frederick's crowning as king of Bohemia; and the forcible ejection of the young couple from their new kingdom by Catholic forces soon afterwards - James found himself being dragged into the continental Thirty Years' War.

His health failing, the old king died in 1625 and was succeeded by his son Charles, who initially threw himself into the fight against the Catholic powers, but eventually withdrew from the European conflict in 1630.

Charles I was a conscientious and principled ruler, but he was also stubborn, reserved and politically maladroit. From the moment that he first assumed the crown, uneasy murmurs about his style of government began to be heard.

Over the next 15 years, many of Charles's English subjects became alienated by his religious policies and by his apparent determination to rule without

parliaments.

Some, especially the more zealous Protestants, or 'puritans', came to believe in the existence of a sinister royal plot - one which aimed at the restoration of the Catholic faith in England and the destruction of the people's liberties.

Similar fears were abroad in Scotland, and when Charles attempted to introduce a new prayer book to that country in 1637 he provoked furious resistance.

Charles's subsequent attempts to crush the Scots by force went disastrously wrong, forcing him to summon an English parliament in October 1640. Once this assembly had begun to sit, Charles was assailed by angry complaints about his policies.

At first, the king seemed to have practically no supporters. But as puritan members of parliament began to push for wholesale reform of the church and religious traditionalists became alarmed, Charles found himself at the head of a swelling political constituency.

Then, in 1641, the Catholics of Ireland rose up in arms, killing many hundreds of the English and Scottish Protestants who had settled in their country.

The rebellion caused panic in England, and made it harder than ever for a political compromise to be reached. Charles I and parliament could not agree and England began to divide into two armed camps.

Civil war

The civil war which broke out in 1642 saw a broadly Royalist north and west ranged against a broadly Parliamentary south and east.

Charles derived particular advantage from the support of the Welsh and the Cornish, who supplied him with many of his foot soldiers, while parliament derived still more advantage from its possession of London.

In mid-1643, it looked as if the king might be about to defeat his opponents, but later that year the Parliamentarians concluded a military alliance with the Scots.