

Chapter 3

The Early Stuarts

The Crown, therefore, had formidable, but perishable, assets. There was nothing inexorable either about the way the Tudor political system collapsed, causing civil war and revolution, or about the way monarchy and Church returned and re-established themselves. Fewer men feared or anticipated, let alone sought, civil war in the 1620s or 1630s than had done so in the 1550s and 1590s. Few people felt any confidence in the 1660s and 1670s that republicanism and religious fanaticism had been dealt an irrevocable blow.

Moving away from Civil War

Throughout Elizabeth's reign, there was a triple threat of civil war: over the wholly uncertain succession; over the passions of rival religious parties; and over the potential interest of the Continental powers in English and Irish domestic disputes. All these extreme hazards had disappeared or receded by the 1620s and 1630s. The Stuarts were securely on the throne with undisputed heirs; the English Catholic community had settled for a deprived status but minimal persecution (they were subject to discriminatory taxes and charges and denied access to public office), while the Puritan attempt to take over the Church by developing their own organizations and structures within it had been defeated. A Puritan piety and zeal was widespread, but its principal characteristic was now to accept the essential forms and

practices of the Prayer Book and the canons but to supplement and augment them by their own additional services, preachings, and prayer meetings. Above all, they sought to bring a spiritualization to the household that did not challenge but supplemented parochial worship. These additional forms were the kernel and the Prayer Book services the husk of their Christian witness, but the degree of confrontation between Puritans and the authorities decreased, and the ability of Puritans to organize an underground resistance movement to ungodly kings had vanished. Finally, the decline of internal tensions and the scale of conflicts on the Continent itself removed the incentive for other kings to interfere in England's domestic affairs. In all these ways, England was moving away from civil war in the early seventeenth century. Furthermore, there is no evidence of a general decline into lawlessness and public violence: quite the reverse. Apart from a momentary spasm induced by the earl of Essex's attempts to overturn his loss of position at court, the period 1569–1642 is the longest period of domestic peace which England had ever enjoyed. No peer and probably no gentleman was tried for treason between 1605 and 1641. Indeed, only one peer was executed during that period (Lord Castlehaven in 1631, for almost every known sexual felony). The number of treason trials and executions in general declined decade by decade.

Early Stuart England was probably the least violent country in Europe. There were probably more dead bodies on stage during a production of *Hamlet* or *Titus Andronicus* than in any one violent clash or sequence of clashes over the first 40 years of the century. Blood feuds and cycles of killings by rival groups were unheard of. England had no brigands, bandits, or even groups of armed vagabonds, other than occasional gatherings of 'Moss Troopers' in the Scottish border regions. While the late sixteenth century could still see rivalries and disputes amongst county justices flare up into fisticuffs and drawn swords (as in Cheshire in the 1570s and Nottinghamshire in the 1590s), respect for the institutions of justice was sufficient to prevent a perpetuation of such violence into the seventeenth century.

Englishmen were notoriously litigious, but that represented a willingness to submit to the arbitration of the king's courts. There was still much rough justice, many packed juries, much intimidation, and many informal community sanctions against offenders. But it stopped short of killings. A random fanatic stabbed the duke of Buckingham to death in 1628, but few if any other officers of the Crown – lords-lieutenant, deputy lieutenants, justices of the peace, or sheriffs – were slaughtered or maimed in the execution of their duty. A few bailiffs distraining the goods of those who refused to pay rates or taxes were beaten up or chased with pitchforks, but generally speaking the impression of law and order in the early decades is one of the omniscience of royal justice and one of a spectacular momentum of obedience in the major endeavours of government. It even seems likely that riots (most usually concerned with grain shortages, or the enclosure of common land depriving cottagers and artisans of rights essential to the family economy) were declining in frequency and intensity decade by decade. Certainly the degree of violence was strictly limited and few if any persons were killed during riots. The response of the authorities was also restrained: four men were executed for involvement in a riot at Maldon in 1629 just weeks after the quelling of a previous riot. Otherwise, the authorities preferred to deploy minimum force and to impose suspended sentences and to offer arbitration along with or instead of prosecutions. Riots posed no threat to the institutions of the State or to the existing social order.

The fact that few contemporaries expected a civil war may only mean that major structural problems went unrecognized. England may have been becoming ungovernable. The fact that neither crew nor passengers of an aircraft anticipate a crash does not prevent that crash. But while planes sometimes crash because of metal fatigue or mechanical failure, they also sometimes crash because of pilot error. The causes of the English Civil War are too complex to be explained in terms of such a simple metaphor, but it does seem that the war was more the consequence of pilot error than of mechanical failure.

When, with the wisdom of hindsight, contemporaries looked back at the causes of the 'Great Rebellion', they very rarely went back before the accession of Charles I in 1625. They were probably right.

James I

James I was, in many ways, a highly successful king. This was despite some grave defects of character and judgement. He was the very reverse of Queen Elizabeth. He had a highly articulate, fully developed, and wholly consistent view of the nature of monarchy and of kingly power – and he wholly failed to live up to it. He was a major intellectual, writing theoretical works on government and engaging effectively in debate with leading Catholic polemicists on theological and political issues, as well as turning his mind and his pen to the ancient but still growing threat of witchcraft, and to the recent and menacing introduction of tobacco. He believed that kings derived their authority directly from God and were answerable to God alone for the discharge of that trust. But James also believed that he was in practice constrained by solemn oaths made at his coronation to rule according to the 'laws and customs of the realm'. However absolute kings might be in the abstract, in the actual situation in which he found himself, he accepted that he could only make law and raise taxation in Parliament, and that every one of his actions as king was subject to judicial review. His prerogative, derived though it was from God, was enforceable only under the law. James was, in this respect, as good as his word. He had several disagreements with his Parliaments, or at any rate with groups of members of Parliament, but these differences were mostly unnecessary and of temporary effect. Thus he lectured the Commons in 1621 that their privileges derived from his gift, and this led to a row about their origins. But he was only claiming a right to comment on their use of his gift; he was not claiming, and at no point in relation to any such rights and liberties did he claim, that he had the right to revoke such gifts. It was this tactlessness, this ability to make the right

argument at the wrong moment, that earned him Henry IV of France's sobriquet, 'the wisest fool in Christendom'.

His greatest failings, however, were not intellectual but moral and personal. He was an undignified figure, unkempt, uncouth, unsystematic, and fussy. He presided over a court where peculation and the enjoyment of perquisites rapidly obstructed efficient and honest government. Royal poverty made some remuneration of officials from tainted sources unavoidable. But under James (though not under his son) this got out of hand.

The public image of the court was made worse by a series of scandals involving sexual offences and murder. At one point in 1619 a former lord chamberlain, a former lord treasurer, a former secretary of state, and a former captain of the Gentlemen Pensioners all languished in the Tower on charges of a sexual or financial nature. In 1618, the king's latent homosexuality gave way to a passionate affair with a young courtier of minor gentry background, who rose within a few years to become duke of Buckingham, the first non-royal duke to be created for over a century. Buckingham was to take over the reins of government from the ailing James and to hold them for the young and prim Charles I, until his assassination in 1628. Such a poor public image cost the king dear. His lack of fiscal self-restraint both heightened his financial problem and reduced the willingness of the community at large to grant him adequate supply.

James I was a visionary king, and in terms of his own hopes and ambitions he was a failure. His vision was one of unity. He hoped to extend the union of the Crowns of England and Scotland into a fuller union of the kingdoms of Britain. He wanted full union of laws, of parliaments, of churches; he had to settle for a limited economic union, a limited recognition of joint citizenship, and a common flag. The sought-after 'union of hearts and minds' completely eluded him. James's vision was expressed in flexible, gradualist proposals. It was

wrecked by the small-mindedness and negative reflexes of the parliamentary county gentry. He also sought to use the power and authority of his three crowns – England, Scotland, and Ireland – to promote the peace and unity of Christian princes, an aim which produced solid achievements in James's arbitration in the Baltic and in Germany in his early years, but which was discredited in his later years by his inability to prevent the outbreak of the Thirty Years War and the renewed conflict in the Low Countries. Finally, he sought to use his position as head of the 'Catholic and Reformed' Church of England, and as the promoter of co-operation between the Presbyterian Scots and episcopal English Churches, to advance the reunion of Christian Churches. His attempts to arrange an ecumenical council and the response of moderates in all churches, Catholic, orthodox, Lutheran, and Calvinist, to his calls for an end to religious strife were again wrecked by the outbreak of the Thirty Years War. But they had struck a resonant chord in many quarters.

James's reign did see, however, the growth of political stability in England, a lessening of religious passions, domestic peace, and the continuing respect of the international community. His 'plantation policy' in Ulster, involving the dispossession of native Irish Catholic landowners and their replacement by thousands of families from England (many of them in and around Londonderry settled by a consortium of Londoners) and (even more) from south-west Scotland, can also be counted a rather heartless short-term success, though its consequences are – all too grimly – still with us. He left large debts, a court with an unsavoury reputation, and a commitment to fight a limited war with Spain without adequate financial means.

He had squabbled with his Parliament and had failed to secure some important measures which he had propounded to them: of these, the Act of Union with Scotland and an elaborate scheme, known as the Great Contract, for rationalizing his revenues were the only ones that mattered. But he had suffered no major defeat at their hands in the

sense that Parliament failed to secure any reduction in royal power and had not enhanced its own participation in government by one jot. Parliament met when the king chose and was dismissed when its usefulness was at an end. Procedural developments were few and had no bearing on parliamentary power. Parliament had sat for less than one month in six during the reign and direct taxation counted for less than one-tenth of the total royal budget. Most members recognized that its very survival as an institution was in serious doubt. No one believed that the disappearance of Parliament gave them the right, let alone the opportunity, to resist the king. James was a Protestant king who ruled under law. He generated distaste in some, but distrust and hatred in few if any, of his subjects. Charles I's succession in 1625 was the most peaceful and secure since 1509, and arguably since 1307.

Charles I

Just as there is a startling contrast between Elizabeth I and James I so there is between James I and Charles I. Where James was an informal, scruffy, approachable man, Charles was glacial, prudish, withdrawn, and shiftily. He was a runt, a weakling brought up in the shadow of an accomplished elder brother who died of smallpox when Charles was 12. Charles was short, a stammerer, a man of deep indecision who tried to simplify the world around him by persuading himself that where the king led by example and where order and uniformity were set forth, obedience and peace would follow. He was one of those politicians so confident of the purity of his own motives and actions, so full of rectitude, that he saw no need to explain his actions or justify his conduct to his people. He was an inaccessible king except to his confidants. He was a silent king where James was voluble, a king assertive by deed not word. He was in many ways the icon that James had described in *Basilikon Doron*.

Government was very differently run. Charles was a chaste king who presided over a chaste court; venality and peculation were stanchd; in