Comment

The Last Catholic King

James VII and II, King of Scots (the title he preferred), King of England and of Ireland, lost the throne in the so-called 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, because he was an autocratic bigot who sought to force Catholicism on the English — as every schoolboy knows.

His Anglican daughter Mary, born years before he converted to Catholicism, and her husband, his nephew, the Calvinist Prince William of Orange, were invited by an influential group of English aristocrats, known as the 'Immortal Seven', to take the throne, which they did, arriving with a large Dutch army in November 1688, comprising twice as many soldiers as the Royal army. Losing his nerve and unwilling to put up a fight, James was permitted to take refuge in France. Losing his nerve again, in 1689, he allowed his largely Irish army to be outmanoeuvred by William at the Battle of the Boyne, a remarkably unbloody battle for those days, though with immense symbolic implications for the future of Ireland.

Pope Innocent XI had the 'Te Deum' sung in Rome in thanksgiving for James's defeat. Commonly said to have done his best to moderate what he took to be the King's imprudently aggressive attempts to restore Catholicism, the Pope was no doubt also miffed by his refusal to restore to the Holy See the authority over the *Ecclesia Anglicana* which the crown acquired under Henry VIII. James believed, not only that this authority was rightfully his, but also that he needed it for the advancement of Catholicism.

James was much more complicated than the standard story proposes. In a ceremony held in Trafalgar Square on 14 October 2005, round Grinling Gibbons's statue of James, members of the Royal Stuart Society sought to advance their campaign for the rehabilitation of the last Catholic monarch as an enlightened ruler who favoured religious toleration for Quakers, Nonconformists and even Jews, as well as for his co-religionists, rather than the bigoted autocrat of the old Whig history books.

This is by no means an eccentric view. Following its capture by the English in 1664, the Dutch territory of New Netherland was renamed New York in James's honour, as was the town of New Amsterdam. (He had been Duke of York since his birth in 1633.) Fort Orange, 150 miles up the Hudson River, was renamed Albany. (He was Duke of Albany in Scotland.) He never visited the colony. Long before he

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became King, however, he granted liberty of conscience in religious matters to the mixed population of English, French and Dutch settlers (though resisted their demands for a representative assembly). Even more remarkably, he granted toleration to the small Jewish community, giving them their first synagogue. (No doubt he felt gratitude to David da Costa and Augustine Coronel-Chacon, Jews who gave financial aid to the family during their exile in Holland, after his father's execution in 1649.)

Quakers and Papists were much harassed, in Scotland and, even more so, in England, throughout the seventeenth century. William Penn (1644–1718), the greatest of English Quakers, became interested as early as 1666 in establishing a home in North America for Quakers suffering persecution in England. In 1680 he petitioned Charles II for help: the King, in repayment of the loan which Penn's father had made to him, granted territory in North America. Penn named the territory Sylvania — strenuously but vainly resisting the King's insistence on Pennsylvania, in honour of his father. Back in England, in 1686, Penn persuaded James — King since 1685 — to set free some 1, 200 Quakers. In 1687, if he did not actually help to draft the first Declaration of Indulgence, aimed at suspending the penal laws against non-Anglicans, he at any rate probably drew up the address of thanks on the part of the Quakers. Evidently trusted by the King, Penn certainly supported his actions to extend toleration to non-Anglicans. He was never enthusiastic about emancipating papists. Nevertheless, he was one of the few of James's friends who remained in London when he was ousted and, twice summoned before the Privy Council, Penn spoke bravely on James's behalf. He admitted that James asked him to come to him in France.

James lived out his life in France. Many people regarded him as a saint. He died in 1701. Penn was to die in England, in 1718. The two never met again. The respect which they clearly had for one another certainly suggests that, far from being the bigoted Catholic autocrat of legend, James showed impressive openness to those who held different religious beliefs from his own. The restrictions he sought to remove were reimposed in 1689; it was to be well into the nineteenth century before Jews, Quakers and Dissenters, as well as Catholics, gained the religious freedoms in England and Scotland that the last Catholic monarch envisaged.

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