

King Charles II

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In many ways Charles II was the last King of England, if by King we mean someone with extensive powers. The struggle between Parliament and King had raged in the 1640's resulting in a Civil War and culminating in 1649 in the execution of Charles I, the father of Charles II. The result had been the emergence of Oliver Cromwell with the powers of a dictator. The subsequent death of Cromwell in 1658 led to a crisis of succession, showing the utmost importance of traditions when it comes to the regular and peaceful succession of overlords, something many countries had learned at the peril during the Medieval centuries. What followed, somewhat paradoxically to modern observers, was the restoration of the monarchy and the reinstatement of the 'lawful' monarch - the eldest son Charles of his hapless father. However, the reign of Charles II would just be an interlude, although he successfully fought off attempts at abolishing the monarchy and the attempts of exclusion of his brother James to the throne, the tenure of the latter would just be three years before he ignominiously was forced out of the country. His nephew William in partnership with his daughter, did exercise some considerable authority but the absolute monarchy was dead, and from then on English monarchs would only play a ceremonial role, icons of continuity and symbols of ages, but not much more.

His early youth was traumatic due to the Civil War in which his father and the Parliament got embroiled in. He did see some action on the battle field as a teenager, and he spent some time in exile on the Isle of Wight during which he had ample opportunity to indulge in the carnal pleasures for which he later would become notorious. The situation became untenable and he joined his family in French exile, during which they lived in restrained circumstances, although his mother was the daughter of Henri IV, and her brother Louis XIII was the King. One sister, with momentous consequences married into Dutch Royalty, out of which would spring the above mentioned nephew - William.

The execution of Charles I was, for obvious reasons, seen as illegal by ruling dynasties, and from the start Charles thought of himself as Charles II, the rightful heir. But how to regain his Kingdom? The natural allies would be the Scots, after all he was in a way foremost the King of Scotland, and the latter country was not in any formal way united with England, except through this joint Kingship. In particular the English Parliament had no jurisdiction over Scotland, who had its own. However, the Scots were not strong enough militarily, and the relationship between Charles and the Scots quickly soured. His attempt of a military take-over failed miserably, and after a decisive battle at Worcester in 1651 he was reduced to a fugitive in his own country on the run from the English authorities. This part of his life did involve in addition to adventure also some real hardship. It lasted some time before he was able to secure a passage to France.

As noted above the aftermath of the death of Cromwell was chaotic. His son, did not have enough power to continue the dynasty his father, who was but in name a King, and as a result Charles could step in achieving the restoration, through an astute act of

diplomacy, letting bygones be bygones, and promising, unlike his father to respect the Parliament. But he was not entirely free of retribitional instincts, he only reined them in. Trials were held, heads rolled, and most notably, the corpse of Cromwell was dug out of Westminster Abbey, duly beheaded, with the rotting head put on a stake by the Parliament. His reign was to last for a quarter of a century and brought about a more tolerant atmosphere compared to the Puritan favored by Cromwell. The King was fond of flesh. His marriage with a Portuguese princess left no issue, but he had a dozen or so offsprings from his various liaisons. There was a succession of mistresses, some of them Catholic (like the Queen herself), some taken from high society, while the 'Protestant whore' - Nell Gwynn was an actress as the King was fond of the theatre, which enjoyed a renaissance after the Puritan interlude. They were all well taken care of, in fact kept in style, a profligacy that kept the King strapped for money and financially dependent on the parliament, and as we will note incurring foreign financial dependence as well. As a person the Charles II was affable and tolerant, and far more flexible than his father. As to religion he naturally had a sympathetic attitude towards Catholicism. A large part of his family, including his mother and wife, along with some of his paramours were Catholics after all, and this did raise suspicions as to his loyalty. In fact on his deathbed he converted to Catholicism under the gingerly tutelage of his brother. As to politics, his firm stand was for the preservation of the monarchial powers, and also to prevent the exclusion of his brother James from accession. He did see the importance of the Navy and fought with the Parliament to have it properly funded. In foreign policy he was suspicious of the Dutch, although his advisors pressed him into a union with the Dutch and incidentally also with the Swedes, and as a consequence his relation with his nephew William was strained. His natural affinities lay with his cousin - Louis XIV, and he did in fact receive from him generous subsidies, allowing him to maintain a life of luxury as well as fund his Navy, a fact which if it had been brought into open would have caused more than embarrassment. The price to pay for the financial support was a stand of neutrality in the conflict the French had with the Dutch. In fact Holland was fighting a war of survival against the encroaching French superpower, as well as successfully rivaling the English, as a seafaring commercial nation, having so far the edge as to colonial enterprises.

As to the advisors of the King, and a King with great power cannot function without able advisors, who in fact, as long as they enjoy the trust of their sovereign, exercises even greater power, one should mention Clarendon whom he had inherited from his father, and who in a sense had brought up the King politically, complaining of his laziness. Clarendon grew old, retired and died, but one of his daughters married James, and thus became the mother of two subsequent sovereigns, Mary and Anne. Later on Digby became an invaluable support for the King, although in the end, political pressures managed to maneuver him into the Tower (out of which he managed to extricate himself alive this being the end of the 17th century not the 16th, one reason being the introduction of Habeas Corpus).

The relationship between the King and his brother James, was in spite of outward loyalty not surprisingly a bit strained. Reportedly, when James warned his brother of the dangers of taking walks in the city park, the latter retorted that no sane person would kill him to have him replaced by his brother. In fact the warning was not idle, some plots against the life of the King were unearthed, some genuine, some trumped up. The King's

illegitimate son the Duke of Monmouth was implicated in one, after the subsequent death of the King he lost all protection (the King himself was exasperated by him though) and after involvement in an attempt to upset his uncle was apprehended and executed. The general feeling one gets of Charles II is a King devoted to his pleasure, which is often the natural option for one, who does not need to struggle to hold on to his grip on power. And the King himself remarked famously *All appetites are free, and God will never damn a man for allowing himself a little pleasure*. But his pleasures were not entirely restricted to the carnal domain. For one thing, he was fond of sport and exercise and was considered to be in excellent health. Admittedly such interests, especially if passionate, may not only be a substitute for carnal satisfaction but also a prerequisite. In the case of the King, he was bodily well endowed. With a dark olive-colored skin, which had initially caused some embarrassment, and towering above his contemporaries at well over six feet, he struck an imposing, if not conventionally handsome, figure, to whom men as well as women had been naturally drawn. More surprisingly though is his professed interest in science, sponsoring the Royal Society. Much of this interest may have been of genuine curiosity, but its relevance to the Navy and seafaring in general, of which he was a great enthusiast, must also have played some role.

His excellent health did however not protect him from disease and death. First a few years before his death he was stricken out of the blue by some mysterious illness of which he miraculously seemed to escape unscathed effecting a complete recovery. However, in 1685 he was stricken again. A battery of doctors were summoned to his bed and out of deep ignorance attacked his symptoms aggressively, causing a lot of pain in the process. Despite the attention of the medical profession, he managed to linger on for a week, no doubt due to his iron constitution, and being lucid enough to effect, as already noted, a conversion to Catholicism at the very end.