Whigs, Tories, and the End of Charles II

The last four years of Charles II’s reign have received less attention than the previous two decades in the recent wave of historical writing about the Restoration.[1] In part, this relative neglect reflects the continuing impact of the old Whig narrative, which saw the ending of English parliaments in 1681, as in 1629, as a significant historical turning point in an ongoing constitutional struggle between the Crown and parliament. It also reflects the current assumption that the conclusion of Charles’s reign saw an overwhelming triumph of loyalism against political opposition and religious dissent. According to this view, as the Tories established their hegemony after 1681, the Whigs were “crushed,” and the lively political debates of the previous years subsided. The end of Charles II has, therefore, been of less interest, except to scholars who have continued to see the emergence of a new, more authoritarian mode of royal government.

Providing the first modern historical monograph to focus exclusively on the politics of these years, Grant Tapsell also places the end of Charles II in a new conceptual framework. That framework, as well as Tapsell’s title, is consciously borrowed from Kevin Sharpe’s The Personal Rule of Charles I (1992). The principal similarity between Charles II’s style of rule in 1681-85 and his father’s government in the 1630s is the absence of parliamentary sessions. Yet Tapsell is as keen to stress the differences between the prerogative rule of Charles I and the personal rule of Charles II. In 1681-85, many political figures expected another parliament; and given the regularity of sessions between 1660 and 1681, those expectations were not unreasonable. Such widespread anticipation of another parliament sustained the partisan quarrels of 1678-81. Indeed, hope for another session and local political tensions kept parliamentary politics alive and well in England, even in the absence of a parliament. The political news culture that had developed before 1681 also maintained itself, despite government efforts to silence Whig printers. Pamphlets and newsheets still provoked political discussion throughout the localities and reflected opposite political agendas. Coffeehouses and alehouses remained venues for the airing of opinion. The persecution of religious dissenters escalated after 1681, but the penal laws against religious nonconformists were neither applied in all localities nor effective in suppressing dissent. In sum, according to Tapsell, both the vigor of local partisan wrangling and the failure of the government completely to eradicate its opponents from local office holding challenge arguments that Charles finally achieved a more arbitrary or absolute style of monarchy. Neither did structures of rule in Scotland and Ireland or ministerial intrigues in their governments permit the effective assertion of royal authority in those kingdoms. Furthermore, tensions in Scotland and Ireland between loyalists and Crown critics, as well as tensions between Episcopalians and dissenters, contributed to the increasing synchronization of politics in all three kingdoms.

Despite its relative brevity, Tapsell’s book provides a meticulously researched, clearly argued, and well-written reconsideration of the end of Charles II. He provides a far richer analysis of 1681-85 than most versions of the “Tory revenge.” He also provides much new evidence to challenge older arguments about an authoritarian-
ian drift at the end of Charles’s reign. But Tapsell does not always fully consider the evidence on which those older arguments were based. Charles did not, in the end, call another parliament; and as John Kenyon once argued, the ministerial recovery of Robert Spencer, Earl of Sunderland, a convert to French-style absolutism, may be suggestive of some of Charles’s political thinking. [2] After 1681, Charles enjoyed enhanced revenues, an expanding military establishment, and the full support of the Anglican Church leadership. He had many reasons for putting off another parliament, and he had long admired Louis XIV’s administration of France. With such assets and attitudes, he did become a more powerful and more independent monarch after 1681 than he had been before. Secure in his authority, he was not overly troubled, especially after his 1682 political capture of London, by continuing expressions of partisanship and religious dissatisfaction by Whigs and dissenters. Neither did opposition and dissatisfaction in Ireland and Scotland restrain him in significant ways. Most Irish Protestants, dissenting as well as conformist, remained more frightened of Catholics than of Charles; and Scottish legal theory vested the Stewart Crown with more authority than it possessed in England. Tapsell effectively contradicts the notion that opposition politics and public criticism were silenced after 1681; but historians will continue to debate where Charles was really headed before his death.

Tapsell emphasizes that the last four years of Charles’s reign are sharply divided by Whig plotting that climaxed in the autumn of 1682 and by the government’s discovery of that plotting in 1683. Indeed, at one point, he refers to the plot revelations as the “great crisis” of Charles’s personal rule (p. 145). But Tapsell does not always make sufficient allowance, in his topically organized chapters, for how the “feel” of politics changed after the exposure of the plotting. In England, opposition partisanship became far more discreet as Tories embellished the details of how some Whigs had actually sought to return the kingdom to rebellion and regicide. Whig publications continued to circulate, and critical voices were still raised in the public sphere; but Whig printers and authors got far less into print after 1682-83, and the loudest critical voices were frequently silenced by prosecutions. Talk of a parliament died down; and little was said when Charles ignored the 1664 Triennial Act in 1684. Most Whigs remained stalwart and sullen in their opposition to the succession of James, Duke of York and to a narrow, persecuting church; but the loss of leaders, like the Earl of Shaftesbury, Algernon Sidney, and Lord William Russell, as well as the harassment of Whigs and dissenters in many localities, discouraged active partisanship. In Scotland, Covenanters and Camerons faced far more draconian government responses after 1683 than before, while Irish dissenters feared their de facto toleration might be jeopardized by events in England and Scotland.

None of this is to deny either that Whigs and Tories continued to contend in England through 1685, or that the political and religious conflicts in Charles’s three kingdoms continued to converge. Yet 1682-83 was arguably the watershed that 1681 was not. Historians and other scholars are indebted to Tapsell for providing a welcome new framework in which to explore these and other issues of the Restoration.

Notes

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