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Charles I



Mark Parry

Charles I

Charles I provides a detailed overview of Charles Stuart, placing his reign firmly within the wider context of this turbulent period and examining the nature of one of the most complex monarchs in British history.

The book is organised chronologically, beginning in 1600 and covering Charles' early life, his first difficulties with his parliaments, the Personal Rule, the outbreak of Civil War, and his trial and eventual execution in 1649. Interwoven with historiography, the book emphasises the impact of Charles' challenging inheritance on his early years as king and explores the transition from his original championing of international Protestantism to his later vision of a strong and centralised monarchy influenced by continental models, which eventually provoked rebellion and civil war across his three kingdoms. This study brings to light the mass of contradictions within Charles' nature and his unusual approach to monarchy, resulting in his unrivaled status as the only English king to have been tried and executed by his own subjects.

Offering a fresh approach to this significant reign and the fascinating character that held it, *Charles I* is the perfect book for students of early modern Britain and the English Civil War.

Mark Parry read History at Cambridge and completed a doctorate on the political role of the episcopate under the early Stuarts. He teaches History at Westminster School. He is the author of several academic articles on the political and religious history of the early Stuart period and of an A-level textbook *Stuart Britain and the Crisis of Monarchy, 1603–1702* (2015).

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Charles I

Mark Parry

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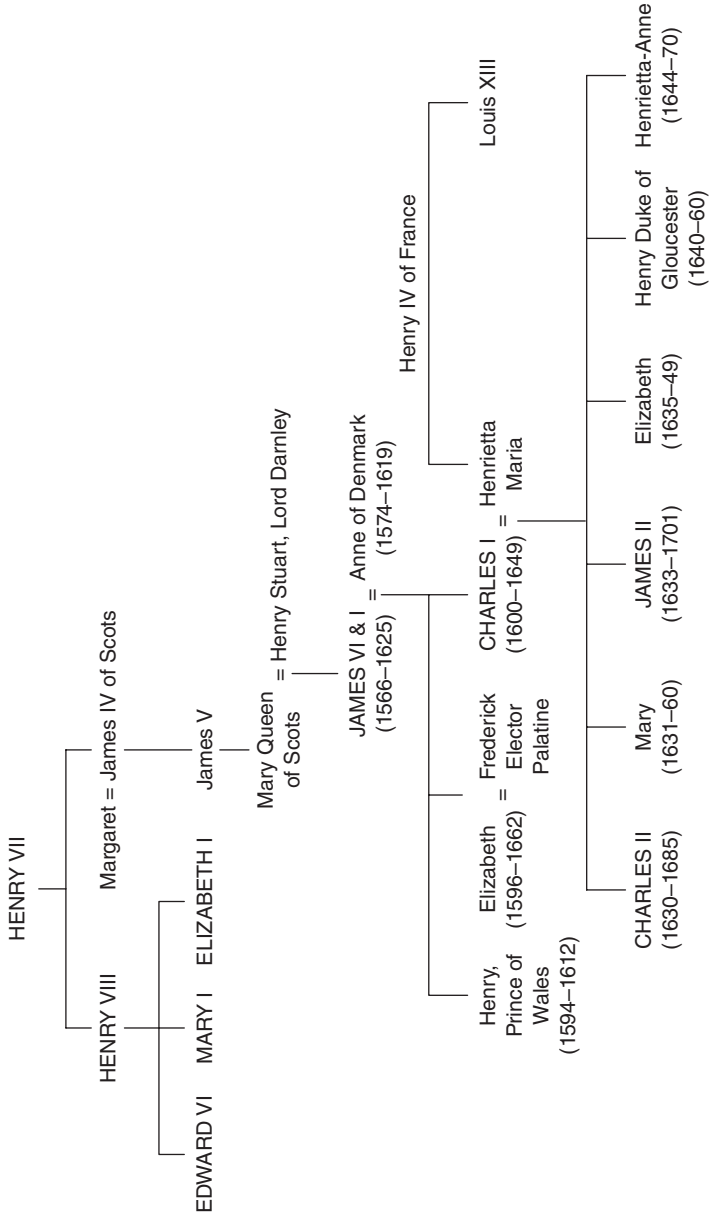
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has been not only enormous fun but also formative: while instinctively less than impressed by Charles as a king ('Oh Charles!') was one commonly characteristic reaction to the latest part of the story in lessons, their perceptive questions, refusal to be satisfied with simplistic explanations and their keenness to question and challenge received wisdom has frequently challenged me in my own thinking and led me to modify my own views about the reign. In so far as there is an intended audience for this book, I hope it might not prove unuseful for sixth-formers studying the period in the future.

Stuart family tree



Introduction

The historical reputation of Charles I

King Charles I looms large in the British historical imagination. His equestrian statue (by Hubert Le Sueur) stands proudly, albeit on a traffic island, just in front of Trafalgar Square, while his bust stares out from the porch of St Margaret's Church opposite the Houses of Parliament. The Banqueting House at Whitehall, the only surviving part of the Whitehall Palace complex, and which contains the grand Rubens ceiling that he commissioned, and in front of which the king was beheaded in 1649, is among London's most visited tourist attractions while a recent exhibition at the Royal Academy entitled 'Charles I: King and Collector', an examination of Charles's artistic tastes and patronage, was hailed as one of the cultural highlights of the year. Charles is one of the few English monarchs to have a society dedicated to him (Richard III being another) in the shape of the Society of St Charles King & Martyr, as well as an attendant feast day in the Church of England calendar. In the nineteenth century the romantic obsession with the defeated royalist cause had a habit of intruding into the pages of popular fiction, including Charles Dicken's *David Copperfield* (in Mr Dick's inability to stop Charles I taking over his memoirs) as well as Conan Doyle's 'The Musgrave Ritual', where Charles's crown is discovered buried in an aristocrat's garden, while his escape from Hampton Court is the backdrop to the events in Captain Maryatt's *Children of the New Forest* (occasionally adapted for television). He appears in cinema too, perhaps most memorably portrayed by Alec Guinness in an entertaining (if not

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always terribly historically accurate) 1970 film, *Cromwell* and by Rupert Everett in *To Kill a King*. His status, as the only British monarch ever to be publicly executed, ensures that he is a perennial point of reference for political failure and guarantees that, in an age sometimes considered ‘post-historical’, he continues to be the subject of popular and media attention.

His historical reputation is much contested. Victorian historians, among whom the great Samuel Rawson Gardiner had the most lasting impact, tended to see Charles as an aspiring but ineffective tyrant, not entirely devoid of good qualities but failing to grasp the fundamental principles of a constitutional system upheld and defended by Parliament. His reign was from the start hindered by his defects as king, chiefly his stubborn refusal to appreciate the views of others and concomitant tendency to divide ‘mankind into two simple classes – into those who agreed with him, and those who did not’.¹ In this account, the early Stuarts generally were seen as misguided architects of ‘divine-right’ kingship, an error only finally corrected by the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Nevertheless, Gardiner’s work, identified several key themes which remain central to modern work on the period, chiefly an awareness of the importance of the British context to the Civil Wars, the centrality of religion, and a belief that the royalists were as worthy of study as the parliamentarians.² The ‘Revisionist’ history of the 1970s onwards, while picking up these themes, modified his narrative substantially, emphasising, instead of long-term political and constitutional clashes, the more short-term crisis caused by the divisiveness of Charles’s religious policies within the wider context of the challenges of ruling three distinct ‘British’ kingdoms and the ‘functional breakdown’ of the financial system.³ Both of these preoccupations led to a re-appraisal of the first early Stuart monarch, James I, seeing him, despite some occasionally tactless pronouncements upon the basis of his royal power, as a moderate and competent manager of religious tensions with a shrewd understanding of the political and religious differences within his three kingdoms. By extension, for the kingdoms to dissolve into bitter civil war by 1642, the mistakes must be those of James’s son and successor, Charles. The best tribute paid to him, in this analysis, is that he was not incompetent enough to be deposed in the way that his royal predecessors, Edward II, Richard II and

Henry VI were: rather, he was an adept enough 'party leader' to rally a body of supporters and fight a civil war.⁴

Some subsequent scholarship, sometimes labelled 'post-revisionist', has sought to step back from this by suggesting that longer-term political and ideological tensions did exist within the early Stuart polity, and have also focused on politics beyond Whitehall and Westminster to demonstrate the vibrancy of early seventeenth-century political discourse, particularly print culture. Within this framework, Charles's failure has tended to be seen as one of public relations, as a distant monarch suspicious of 'popularity', who refused 'to resort to print to woo public opinion as his opponents were doing', and in the process, lost battle for hearts and minds.⁵ Attempting to reconcile these positions, and synthesise the revisionist as well as the post-revisionist legacy, other historians such as Tim Harris have emphasised the room for differing interpretations of the extent of both royal and parliamentary power within the early Stuart polity, which allowed ideological conflict to emerge when practical disagreements ensued. As such, the minimalisation of ideological conflict on the grounds that all political agents were operating within the same world-view and using the same language, is misconceived.⁶ This is not to resurrect the old Whig narrative of righteous common lawyers in the House of Commons 'winning the initiative' from overweening monarchs but rather to appreciate that there were competing world-views and competing conspiracy theories in which Puritans in Parliament could view the existence of a 'Popish Plot' as a genuine reality and Charles, his court, and key advisers as aspiring architects of tyrannical government; but Charles and his political and episcopal lieutenants could also see his opponents as deliberately seeking to undermine the efficacy of executive government and the royal prerogative, while cloaking their radical and rebellious political designs in insincere religious rhetoric. Viewing the early Stuart period in this way also prompts some qualification of the formerly positive appraisal of James I, highlighting his failure to address some of the Crown's structural problems (notably its financial weakness) as well as the continuities between his policies and those of his son, notably, as shown by the work of Laura Stewart, in

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relation to the ‘confessionalisation’ they pursued in Scotland, contributing to the difficulties faced by Charles and so highlighting the invidious nature of the Jacobean inheritance.⁷

Charles’s character in context

Many existing biographies students are arguably out of date or fail to give coverage to the entirety of the reign. Charles Carlton’s *Charles I: The Personal Monarch* employed a psychoanalytical approach which has now been largely discredited. It is also rather simplistic in its conclusions. In the preface to the second edition Carlton states bluntly: ‘I maintain that the king – more than anyone else – was to blame for the bloodiest war known to English history. In sum, Charles failed because of his own personal defects’. He is also guilty of anachronism, suggesting that ‘Charles was less a Burkean, even Thatcherite Conservative, than he was a reactionary, whose insecurity made him an authoritarian’.⁸ Kevin Sharpe’s revisionist account of the Personal Rule, *The Personal Rule of Charles I* highlighted some more positive features of the 1630s, notably artistic patronage, court culture, and the systematic nature of Charles’s attempts to reform government and society. Even if he overstated the case for the establishment of ‘conciliar government’, and underplayed the role of Laud in the formation of Caroline religious policy, this grand work did show that there was an integrity and consistency to Charles’s project for governing his three kingdoms and encouraged historians of the period to begin viewing events according to Charles’s world-view in which hierarchy, dignity, honour, and their political expression, the royal prerogative, mattered.⁹ Biography has rarely produced positive views of the king. Michael B. Young’s analysis was ultimately quite conventional, seeing Charles as an anachronistic reactionary who, ‘In his view of the relationship between a king and his subjects. . . had a medieval mentality while increasing numbers of his subjects had early modern mentalities’.¹⁰ While there is certainly mileage in considering Charles’s medievalism, in areas ranging from his fiscal policy to his relations with his nobility, Young’s overriding conclusion was somewhat simplistic, concluding that ultimately the king’s untrustworthiness was the ‘fundamental, unforgiveable defect in Charles’s character that in

the end made his execution necessary. It was truly his fatal flaw'.¹¹ While the charge of untrustworthiness is not without foundation, to label it 'unforgiveable' rather overlooks the complexities of the problems he faced and it is important to uncover why Charles behaved in this way (notably in his negotiations with Army and Parliament between 1646 and 1648) and to see it as part of a wider breakdown of trust between the king and his parliamentary critics, a breakdown that had many of its roots in the crucial failures of the parliaments of 1625–29.

The best recent biography of the king is that by Richard Cust, *Charles I: A Political Life*, which is balanced and reflects many years of study of the period. Cust's analysis of Charles's personality, with its emphasis on the twin dimensions of prudence and conscience (made popular among contemporaries by the renewal of interest in the works of the Roman historian, Tacitus), and on Charles's own obsession with honour and loyalty, is much more persuasive than Carlton's psychoanalysis or Young's simplistic conclusion that Charles was, essentially, a 'reactionary'. Cust presents a sympathetic but nevertheless critical account of Charles's reign, highlighting his understanding of the need for political manipulation and tactical manoeuvre, even if he did not always make the right judgements. In addition, he shows that his performance as a war-leader during the Civil Wars was more impressive than often thought (this picks up Conrad Russell's verdict that Charles was a much better 'party leader' than he was a king), and that he was a competent military commander. He shows awareness of changes in the king's views and approaches over the course of his reign but at the same time stresses certain continuities, particularly his deep hostility to puritanism and his fear of 'popularity'.¹² As will be seen, when combined with others of his character-traits (notably his sensitivity to slights upon his honour and challenges to his authority), this prevented both his working effectively with his parliaments in the 1620s and reaching agreement with his enemies in the later 1640s.

There is, however, more recent work on Charles's reign that needs to be taken account of in any new biography. Cust's own book on *Charles I and the Aristocracy* (2011) has shown the depth of Charles's attachment to chivalry and aristocratic culture at the Caroline court.¹³ This links in to John Adamson's work on the role

of the nobility in the reign as a whole but particularly in bringing about the crisis in England in 1640–42.¹⁴ Charles's relationship with his nobility is an important theme in his reign and helps explain much about the course of it. Work on the political culture of the 1630s also requires us to consider the king's presentation of himself as an 'imperial' ruler and consider the way in which he and his councillors tried to solve the problems of ruling three distinct kingdoms in the shape of England, Scotland, and Ireland. It is worth reflecting on the extent to which Charles had a 'vision' for ruling his three kingdoms, one that was more than an attempt to repress dissent and stifle opposition, and actually contained an intentional project which promoted unity and conformity as positive features.¹⁵ Resonances have been detected with the wider seventeenth-century European context, and approaches such as that of Geoffrey Parker have highlighted the extent to which Charles faced some of the same sorts of political and religious problems, and attempted some of the same sorts of solutions, as his contemporary monarchs in France and Spain. It is also important to appreciate how post-Reformation politics in Europe generally produced significant diplomatic as well as religious difficulties for British monarchs, and, as Michael Questier has recently argued, it is possible to consider that, given the circumstances of the times, the move towards peace and the dispensing with parliament in 1629 was an instance of how 'the Stuart monarchy had, at the end of the 1620s, read the political tea-leaves correctly'.¹⁶ This strengthens the case for treating the Personal Rule and Charles's approach to government on their own terms, embodying an alternative, if ultimately unsuccessful, vision of how the country should be governed as a partnership between Charles and his elite subjects within a turbulent European context of which he and his contemporaries were fully aware.

Perhaps the most important recent writing on Charles, however, is that by the late Mark Kishlansky. In a provocative article, 'Charles I: A Case of Mistaken Identity', *Past and Present* (2005) and a short biography in the new Penguin series, *Charles I: An Abbreviated Life* (2014), Kishlansky sought to demolish some of the shibboleths surrounding Charles's reign, notably the charges that he was inflexible and untrustworthy. Though Kishlansky's argument becomes less convincing for the mid-late 1640s (Charles's duplicity in his

negotiations with Parliament, the Army, and the Scots seems indisputable, even if Kishlansky is able to cite one or two factors in mitigation), his carefully articulated case that Charles has been unfairly blamed for underhandedness in his response to the Petition of Right in 1628 as well as blunt intransigence in his dealings with the Scots Covenanters in 1638–40 and with the Long Parliament in 1640–1, is more cogent. Indeed several of his courtiers and advisers, notably his wife, Henrietta Maria, were infuriated by his tendency to make concessions after having appeared to wish to stand firm. This should lead us to re-evaluate Charles's performance in the crisis of 1637–42, his overriding mistakes being borne of indecisiveness and failure of nerve in defending and upholding the vision of monarchy pursued during the Personal Rule rather than a total unwillingness to engage with his opponents. The evidence from his private correspondence highlights his negative view of the Scottish rebels, his concessions being a means to buy time, but paradoxically this was a strategy he would balk at in his dealings with both the Scots and his parliamentary opponents in the years 1646–48.

Another recent pre-occupation in the literature on the period has been the role of popular politics. Alistair Bellany and Tom Cogswell have explored the richly dramatic means by which rumours that James I was murdered by the duke of Buckingham and that Charles had knowledge of, or was in some way complicit in, the plot, helped to stoke parliamentary opposition to the duke and to undermine confidence in Charles's rule early on his reign.¹⁷ The theme of popular opposition and criticism has been related specifically to Charles I and his style of ruling by David Cressy. Cressy's view differs substantially from that of Kishlansky, who had suggested that Charles was an open and accessible monarch. Instead, Cressy suggests that Charles was the author of his own downfall, citing evidence of dissent and criticism from all social strata to argue that Charles's worst mistake was, above all, his failure to appreciate and live up to popular expectations of his rule.¹⁸ As Kevin Sharpe argued in his *Image Wars*, in some ways Charles's approach to public relations transitioned from a willingness to justify and defend his policies in the written word in the 1620s to a narrower, more elite-oriented, and aesthetically based image-projection in the 1630s, through portraiture and court culture.¹⁹ He then, however, returned to a

more active cultivation of public opinion through proclamations and printed defences of his actions following the outbreak of the Scottish rebellion in 1638, continuing during the Short and Long Parliaments and the contest for the raising of support in 1641–42, and both during and after the Civil Wars, culminating in his very successful attempt to keep the royalist cause alive even in death through his posthumously published memoir, *Eikon Basilike*, the ‘Image of the King’. While some of this could be seen as a desperate response to political crisis in having to argue a case to his subjects, it is important to appreciate that print was not the only medium through which an image could be crafted and loyalty engendered, and that Charles did not shirk the public-relations battle when it mattered most.

Other important work has considered the character and nature of royalism during the 1640s, as Charles performed the role of ‘party leader’ (in Russell’s phrase). Several recent works re-assess various aspects of the royalist cause and the war effort.²⁰ The contribution by David Scott, and his essay in Adamson (ed.) *The English Civil War: Conflicts and Contexts* (2009), stresses the factional rivalries which beset the royalist court at Oxford and the council of war.²¹ The divisions between ‘swordsmen’ and more moderate royalist politicians were often bitter and affected decision-making; their exposure further highlights the difficulties with which Charles was confronted as a war-leader and also begs further criticism of his failure to manage those around him and discern which was the best ‘counsel’ to follow. His virtues as a leader in war, namely his single-mindedness and ability to inspire loyalty to a cause, need to be set against his undeniable failings.

There has also been a lot of writing on the period between the end of the First Civil War and the king’s execution, as historians attempt to explain the failure to reach a settlement. A particular source of controversy, as reflected in the ongoing debate between Sean Kelsey and Clive Holmes, is the question of when regicide came to be intended by the king’s enemies, and what the trial was actually for. Cust, for instance, regards Kelsey as being ultimately convincing in his assertion that the trial was part of an extended negotiation-strategy rather than the implementation of the Army’s resolution to put Charles to death; Holmes refutes Kelsey’s case strongly in an article and, for the most part,

convincingly.²² The debate does affect how we view Charles as a negotiator and political strategist: if Kelsey is right then Charles is an astute politician who nevertheless ‘overplays his hand’, and the episode might be seen as a final failure in his approach to political negotiations, whereas, if Holmes is right, Charles, while still very much to blame for his own fate on account of his duplicity in starting the Second Civil War in 1648, nevertheless becomes, in 1649, more the victim of forces beyond his control (chiefly the Army). By emphasising the political context in which the key events took place, it is therefore possible to reach a more nuanced appraisal of Charles’s reign up to and including his trial and execution, without seeking to absolve him of his failings or to overlook his mistakes.

David Hume gave this verdict upon Charles’s character in his *History of England*, first published in 1754:

He deserves the epithet of a good, rather than a great man; and was more fitted to rule in a regular established government, than either to give way to the encroachments of a popular assembly, or finally to subdue their pretensions. . . Had he been born an absolute prince, his humanity and good sense had rendered his reign happy, and his memory precious: had the limitations on prerogative been in his time quite fixed and certain, his integrity had made him regard as sacred the boundaries of the constitution. . . And if his political prudence was not sufficient to extricate him from so perilous a situation, he may be excused; since even after the event, when it is commonly easy to correct all errors, one is at a loss to determine what conduct, in his circumstances, could have maintained the authority of the Crown, and preserved the peace of the nation.²³

While Hume’s analysis of Charles is not without serious shortcomings, notably a tendency, unsurprising on the part of an Enlightenment atheist, to regard the king’s religious conviction as ‘superstition’, his verdict nevertheless highlights the extent to which Charles’s weaknesses were exposed by the challenges he was forced to confront during his reign. While resisting too extended a counter-factual excursus, Hume also implies that it is possible to imagine that if Charles had possessed the power

wielded by his contemporaries in France and Spain, who might claim to be 'absolute' princes in the sense that they were not directly dependent (in a financial or legislative sense) upon national representative assemblies, his failings of temperament would have been less evident and his qualities more apparent. It also reinforces the sense in which the ill-defined political and constitutional parameters he inherited were susceptible of different interpretations and, at times, provoked heated ideological conflicts. The sincerity he brought to religious matters might have been manifest in political and constitutional ones had the parameters (and his inheritance) been clearer.

Moreover, the suggestion that negative judgements of Charles rely too heavily on an alternative universe in which a better king (including, as much revisionist scholarship might imply, his father James) resolved all of the political and religious tensions and avoided Civil War also reminds us of the need to appreciate the difficult nature of his inheritance and of the crises that emerged across his three kingdoms. Charles was a human being: a product of his time, of his inheritance, and of his political apprenticeship as Prince of Wales, while his first five years on the throne as a young and energetic king anxious to live up to his subjects' expectations were formative in his evolving conception of monarchy. He was sincere in his religious convictions and took his role as Supreme Governor of an episcopal Church of England extremely seriously, was loyal to those whose support he valued, a devoted husband and father, and a cultivated connoisseur of the arts; he was also genuine in his pursuit of a partnership between Crown and nobility, and a recovery of royal prerogative power which chimed with the spirit of his age on the continent. He also had a sense of the importance of public relations and of political manoeuvre and negotiation. At the same time, he could also be insecure, stubborn, indecisive at crucial moments, and unwilling to see things from his opponents' point of view. His success as a motivator of his royalist supporters is at the same time an indictment of his performance as a unifier of the realm, while he failed to manage disagreements among his advisers during the Civil War, chose commanders based on narrow social conservatism and, in his negotiations with parliamentarian and military leaders after the First Civil War, failed to pursue a consistent and sustainable policy. Yet context

remains crucial: an invidious inheritance, intransigent parliamentary opponents, a radical puritanism which threatened the foundations of his Church and by extension the State, created a perfect storm of political and religious tensions across three kingdoms which few rulers would have been equipped to manage.

Notes

- 1 S.R. Gardiner, *History of England from the Accession of James I to the Outbreak of the Civil War, 1603–1642* (10 vols, London, 1883–4), V, p. 318.
- 2 John Adamson, ‘Introduction: High Roads and Blind Alleys – The English Civil War and its Historiography’, in John Adamson (ed.), *The English Civil War: Conflicts and Contexts* (Basingstoke, 2009), pp. 1–35, at pp. 5–7.
- 3 Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism, c.1590–1640* (Oxford, 1987); Conrad Russell, *The Fall of the British Monarchies, 1637–1642* (Oxford, 1991).
- 4 Conrad Russell, *The Causes of the English Civil War* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 185–211, at pp. 209–10.
- 5 Michael Braddick, *God’s Fury, England’s Fire: A New History of the English Civil Wars* (London, 2008), p. 26; Richard Cust, ‘Charles I and Popularity’, in Tom Cogswell, Richard Cust and Peter Lake (eds.), *Politics, Religion and Popularity* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 235–58.
- 6 A view found in particular in the work of Glenn Burgess, *Absolute Monarchy and the Stuart Constitution* (New Haven, 1996); Peter Lake, ‘From Revisionist to Royalist History; or Was Charles I the First Whig Historian?’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 78 (2015), pp. 657–81.
- 7 Tim Harris, ‘Revisiting the Causes of the English Civil War’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 78 (2015), pp. 615–35; idem, *Rebellion: Britain’s First Stuart Kings, 1567–1642* (Oxford, 2014); Laura A.M. Stewart, *Rethinking the Scottish Revolution: Covenanted Scotland, 1637–1651* (Oxford, 2016).
- 8 Charles Carlton, *Charles I: The Personal Monarch* (2nd edn, London and New York, 1995), pp. xiv, xviii.
- 9 Kevin Sharpe, *The Personal Rule of Charles I* (New Haven and London, 1992), pp. 443–8; cf. Richard Cust, *Charles I: A Political Life*, pp. 138–41.
- 10 Michael B. Young, *Charles I* (Basingstoke, 1997), p. 178.
- 11 Young, *Charles I*, p. 180.
- 12 Cust, *Charles I*, pp. 17–24, 414–19.

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- 13 Richard Cust, *Charles I and the Aristocracy* (Cambridge, 2011).
- 14 John Adamson, *The Noble Revolt* (London, 2007).
- 15 For example, Malcolm Smuts, 'Force, Love and Authority in Caroline Political Culture', in Ian Atherton and Julie Sanders (eds.), *The 1630s: Interdisciplinary Essays on Culture and Politics in the Caroline Era* (Manchester, 2006), pp. 28–49; idem, 'The Court and the Emergence of a Royalist Party', in Jason McElligott and David L. Smith (eds.), *Royalists and Royalism during the English Civil Wars* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 43–64; John Peacock, 'The Image of Charles I as a Roman Emperor', in Atherton and Sanders (eds.), *The 1630s*, pp. 50–73.
- 16 Michael Questier, *Dynastic Politics & the British Reformations, 1558–1630* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 457–8.
- 17 Alistair Bellany and Thomas Cogswell, *The Murder of King James I* (New Haven, 2015).
- 18 David Cressy, *Charles I and the People of England* (Oxford, 2015).
- 19 Kevin Sharpe, *Image Wars: Promoting Kings and Commonwealths in England, 1603–1660* (New Haven and London, 2010), p. 143; Lake, 'From Revisionist to Royalist History', p. 670.
- 20 David Scott, 'Counsel and Cabal in the King's Party, 1642–1646', in Jason McElligott and David L. Smith (eds.), *Royalists and Royalism during the English Civil Wars* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 112–35.
- 21 David Scott, 'Rethinking Royalist Politics, 1642–1649', in John Adamson (ed.), *The English Civil War: Conflicts and Contexts* (Basingstoke, 2009), pp. 36–60.
- 22 Sean Kelsey, 'The Death of Charles I', *The Historical Journal*, 45 (2002), pp. 727–754; Kelsey, 'The Trial of Charles I', *The English Historical Review*, 118 (2003), pp. 583–616; cf. Clive Holmes, 'The Trial and Execution of Charles I', *The Historical Journal*, 53 (2010), pp. 289–316.
- 23 David Hume, *History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Glorious Revolution of 1688* (9 vols, London, 1810), VIII, pp. 140–1.

1 Early life and Prince of Wales (1600–25)

Duke of York

There is an obvious point of comparison between Charles I and Henry VIII. Both were second sons born into dynasties newly established on the English throne; both saw their elder brothers being groomed for the succession while they were restricted to a more minor role as dukes of York; both suddenly found themselves propelled into the limelight and the succession by the untimely deaths of their elder siblings. Yet, aside from the fact that they turned out to be very different monarchs in wildly differing circumstances, there is a further difference: while Henry found himself king at the age of only 17, scarcely an adult by contemporary reckoning, and without having been in any sense schooled in the art of government by his predecessor, Charles was 24 at his accession and had spent the preceding decade being gradually introduced to political life, meeting with foreign ambassadors, attending two parliaments as Prince of Wales, (the second of which was summoned at his urging), and mounting a daring expedition to Madrid in pursuit of his intended bride on his own initiative. As such, Charles in many ways had the ideal preparation for kingship within the context of his age and that needs to be remembered when examining his subsequent reign.

Charles was born at Dunfermline Castle on 19 November 1600. His birth was not greeted with any great fan-fare: his father, James, was away in Edinburgh at the time, and was at that stage merely James VI of Scotland. In England, one leading newsletter writer only found room in his latest missive to

say that 'The Scottish king hath another sonne'.¹ Though James was already being lined up by Elizabeth's wily councillor, Robert Cecil, as her successor on the throne of England, by now he had a son and heir in the shape of Prince Henry, born in 1594. As such Charles's dynastic importance at the time of his birth was limited. He was christened at Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh on 23 December and placed in the care of Lady Margaret Stewart as his governess. As well as being, until 1612, a younger son not destined to inherit the throne, and as a consequence very much in the shadow of his elder brother, the other significant feature of his early life was that he suffered fragile health as a child, and these infirmities prompted sustained concerns about his physical wellbeing and informed much contemporary comment about him. This has also been widely used to explain his subsequent conduct as king. As with other rulers who suffered from physical frailty in infancy, such as Kaiser Wilhelm II, it is sometimes seen as having produced a negative psychological reaction which in turn created an inflexible and autocratic temperament.² Some have gone so far as to employ crude Freudian analyses to suggest that weak limbs and a stammer, together with a distant mother and a homosexual father, determined his personality not only as a child but for long afterwards.³ Even historians who affect to disavow such approaches appear unable to resist the suggestion that his childhood 'explains a great deal about Charles's later behaviour'.⁴ They are not wholly mistaken but closer examination of Charles's early life would suggest that these claims have been overstated.

Undoubtedly Charles was a sickly child. When James VI of Scotland made his triumphant progress south to take up his English Crown in 1603, Charles was left behind in Scotland as being too weak to accompany him. A few weeks after his father's departure, Charles's governor, Lord Fyvie, wrote to James from Edinburgh to report on his health, celebrating the fact that he was 'for the present at better health far then he was' and relating that he now 'eats, drinks, and uses all natural functions as we would wish in any child of his graces age, except that his nights rest is not as yet as sound as we hope in God it shall be shortly'. These encouraging signs, however, were to be seen in the context of 'The great weakness of his body, after so long and heavy sickness', and his physical frailties were outweighed by 'the might and strength of his

spirit and mind', which ensured that he 'looks as stately, and bears as great an majesty in his countenance, as could be required of any prince, albeit four times above his age'.⁵ Aside from the clear effort to accentuate the positive, and assure James of Fyvie's own care and competence, the report suggests that despite acknowledged poor health as a young child, Charles already displayed a natural dignity and bearing which would become much more apparent as he grew to adulthood. A month later, Fyvie assured James that 'although yet weak in body', Charles 'continues, praise be God, in good health, good courage, and lofty mind', and reported that he had even begun to 'speak some words', so that he was 'far better as yet of his mind and tongue nor of his body and feet'.⁶

Such was Charles's progress that James decided to bring his younger son south to join him in England, and sent Dr Henry Atkins to verify that Charles was fit enough to travel. Atkins reported to Cecil on 17 June 1604 that 'The happy health wherein the Almighty at this time does bless his grace is a happy concurrent with his Majesty's designs', while a fortnight later he could assure Charles's mother, Anne of Denmark, that 'our noble young Prince' was 'daily growing from one perfection of health to another', including walking up and down the chamber of Dunfermline Castle 'like a gallant soldier all alone', and expressing a keen desire 'of going to London' to see his mother.⁷ Charles duly began his journey, reaching Berwick 'in very good health' on 21 July and enjoying a lengthy stay at Worksop in Nottinghamshire, a residence of the earl of Shrewsbury, where he enjoyed music and acquired his life-long love of the chase, having 'been intiate in the sports of hunting', after watching 'the quarries of deer killed', before finally reaching his parents at Windsor.⁸

Once in England, other observers noted Charles's continued physical frailty: when Charles was created Duke of York in January 1605, Sir Dudley Carleton commented that 'we have a Duke of York in title, but not in Substance', and suggested that courtiers were much more interested in the Twelfth Night celebrations that began later that day.⁹ The following month, he was placed in the care of Lady Elizabeth Carey as his governess. She was the wife of Sir Robert Carey, and her appointment was reward for her husband's enthusiasm (and opportunism) in riding post-haste from Elizabeth I's deathbed in London in March 1603 to Edinburgh to

deliver the news of James's accession to the English throne. The Careys took their governorship very seriously: Lady Carey complained stridently in October 1607 that the young prince's household was insufficiently provisioned and needed more money to provide a suitably regal diet.¹⁰ It may well, however, have been in their interests to exaggerate Prince Charles's physical infirmities. Sir Robert later wrote that when the prince came into their charge he was 'past four years old' but 'was not able to go, nor scant able to stand alone' and 'was so weak in his joints and especially his ankles, insomuch, as many feared they were out of joint'. He also noted, however, that his enemies were thrilled when his wife was appointed to look after the prince, in case 'the Duke should die in our charge' and then Carey get the blame.¹¹ It therefore perhaps made sense for him to talk-up Charles's ill-health lest he die prematurely, which also allowed him to emphasise the scale of Charles's physical and medical improvement over the following years and therefore his own and his wife's diligence and loyalty, useful when lobbying the king for jobs and pensions at the end of their governorship.¹² Thus of the seven years for which the Careys had charge of the young Duke of York, Carey later wrote that 'he daily grew more and more in health and strength, both in body and mind, to the amazement of many that knew his weakness, when she [Lady Carey] first took charge of him'. During that time, Lady Carey seems to have saved Charles from the rather terrifying treatments that James prescribed both for his stammer, namely that 'the string under his tongue should be cut', and for his difficulties walking, that he be made to wear 'iron boots, to strengthen his sinews and joints'. The king is said to have given way before Lady Carey's protests, and Charles spared these rather brutal remedies.¹³

During this time, and based in the Careys' household, Charles was rather distant from political events. The Gunpowder Plotters had planned to abduct him but he was not their primary target and interrogation of Guy Fawkes revealed that they thought to kidnap Princess Elizabeth instead when they realised they 'knew not how to seize Prince Charles'.¹⁴ His father's court was notably bibulous, even allowing for the bitter exaggeration of the disappointed courtier, Sir Anthony Weldon, upon which so many judgements about it have been based. In 1606 Charles's uncle, King Christian IV of Denmark, visited, and there were reports of

vomiting in the aisles and general drunkenness. Charles is often said to have found this all very distasteful, as reflected in the much more staid and decorous tone of his own court when he became king, but there is nothing to suggest that the young Charles was actively disapproving of his father's more relaxed court and household. As will be seen, Charles's court was indeed very different, but Charles himself expresses nothing but gratitude and admiration towards his father, suggesting that talk of a priggishly negative reaction is somewhat exaggerated.¹⁵

Instead Charles's main focus was his education. Tutored by Thomas Murray, who later became Provost of Eton, Charles appears to have been a hard-working pupil, who 'followed his Booke seriously', and was a 'good Mathematician, not unskilful in Musicke, wel read in Divinity, excellently in History, and no lesse in the Lawes and Statutes of this Nation'.¹⁶ He impressed his father by his diligence and application, and James used Charles's scholarly habits as a stick with which to beat his elder brother. This reportedly led Henry to scoff at Charles's bookishness, and to suggest that when he was king he would make him his archbishop of Canterbury.¹⁷ It may be misleading to draw too sharp a contrast between the two princes, however. Though Henry was celebrated for his athleticism and was certainly more physically imposing, Charles was regarded as an 'excellent Horseman' who could 'shoot well at a marke', and whose introduction to hunting at Worksop in 1604 clearly gave him a love of the chase.¹⁸ If he was the butt of his brother's jokes, it did not diminish his affection for him. When Henry caught typhus after swimming in the Thames following an energetic game of tennis, Charles visited him on his deathbed and tried to comfort him by presenting his favourite toy, a small bronze horse.¹⁹ Henry's death in November 1612 produced an outpouring of public sorrow, and, Charles, chief mourner at the funeral and who reportedly displayed a 'grief beyond his years', was deeply affected. Above all it also brought a radical change in Charles's role in the world.

Prince Charles

At the time of Prince Henry's death, concerns about his younger brother's health remained. Sir Simonds D'Ewes wrote later that

Charles 'was then so young and sickly, as the thought of their enjoying him did nothing at all alleviate or mollify the people's mourning' at the loss of Henry.²⁰ Charles's sister, Princess Elizabeth, was on the point of marrying a German prince, Elector Frederick of the Palatinate (part of James's policy of pursuing a middle way in international relations between the increasingly hostile Catholic and Protestant alliance systems), but it was suggested that she remain in England for a couple of years 'until Prince Charles has grown stronger'. In the event, however, the marriage took place as planned in February 1613, a welcome release from the recent period of mourning, and Charles went to see his sister off as she departed for Germany.²¹

While he would not be created Prince of Wales for another three years, itself partly a reflection of concerns about his health, Charles's household now became a more important theatre for political aspiration. He was given an independent establishment at Richmond Palace, moving there on 1 July 1613, and contemporaries discussed the competition for places within it.²² Charles's enhanced position as heir to the throne also prompted a much higher level of interest in him among the courts and chancelleries of Europe. The Venetian ambassador commented in April 1613 that

in the few months since the death of Prince Henry he has developed greatly in body, far more than in many preceding months. His health is becoming sound, he advances in his studies . . . He is quite aware of his rise in importance, as he is now the only son but all this only makes him more humane.²³

This increased attention was also reflected in discussions about Charles's possible marriage, even though he had not yet reached marriageable age (fourteen). Barely was Prince Henry in his grave than it was being suggested that he replace his brother as candidate for the hand of a French princess, Christine, though, in a foreshadowing of the problems encountered with the later proposed Spanish match, likely French religious demands were seen as an obstacle.²⁴ (In the end the proposals came to nothing and Christine married the Duke of Savoy). Charles also began to take an interest in foreign affairs, being reported as having detailed