

# The Glorious Revolution

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The Glorious Revolution ultimately established the supremacy of parliament over the British monarchy, but how did the deep-seated fear of 'popery' precipitate the events leading up to it?

## Fear of Catholic tyranny

The Glorious Revolution of 1688-1689 replaced the reigning king, James II, with the joint monarchy of his protestant daughter Mary and her Dutch husband, William of Orange. It was the keystone of the Whig (those opposed to a Catholic succession) history of Britain.

According to the Whig account, the events of the revolution were bloodless and the revolution settlement established the supremacy of parliament over the crown, setting Britain on the path towards constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy.

But it ignores the extent to which the events of 1688 constituted a foreign invasion of England by another European power, the Dutch Republic.

Although bloodshed in England was limited, the revolution was only secured in Ireland and Scotland by force and with much loss of life.

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Moreover, the British causes of the revolution were as much religious as political. Indeed, the immediate constitutional impact of the revolution settlement was minimal. Nonetheless, over the course of the reign of William III (1689-1702) society underwent significant and long-lasting changes.

To understand why James II's most powerful subjects eventually rose up in revolt against him we need to understand the deep-seated fear of 'popery' in Stuart England.

'Popery' meant more than just a fear or hatred of Catholics and the Catholic church. It reflected a widely-held belief in an elaborate conspiracy theory, that Catholics were actively plotting the overthrow of church and state.

In their place would be established a Catholic tyranny, with England becoming merely a satellite state, under the control of an all-powerful Catholic monarch, (in the era of the Glorious Revolution, identified with Louis XIV of France). This conspiracy theory was given credibility by the existence of some genuine catholic subterfuge, most notably the Gunpowder Plot of 1605.

A new crisis of 'popery and arbitrary government' erupted in the late 1670s.

Public anxieties were raised by the issue of the royal succession. Charles II fathered no legitimate offspring. This meant that the crown would pass to his brother, James, Duke of York, whose conversion to Catholicism had become public knowledge in 1673.

Public concern about the succession reached fever pitch in the years 1678-1681. The so-called 'exclusion crisis' was provoked by allegations made by Titus Oates, a former Jesuit novice, of a popish plot to assassinate Charles II and place his brother on the throne. The fantastical plot was given credibility by the mysterious death of Sir Edmund Bury Godfrey, the magistrate who first investigated Oates' claims.

Whig politicians within parliament, led by the earl of Shaftesbury, promoted exclusion bills which would have prevented James from succeeding to the throne.

But the radical tactics deployed by the king's opponents, including mass petitions and demonstrations, gradually alienated some initial supporters of exclusion.

Charles's hand was strengthened further by an agreement with France reached in March 1681, by which the king received £385,000 over three years.

With this financial support, and with public opinion turning against his critics, Charles was able to dissolve parliament on 28 March 1681.

## Rebellion and revolt

James II's authority appeared to be secure when he succeeded to the throne in February 1685.

The king's initial promises to defend the existing government in church and state reassured many of those worried by his personal faith.

James was well-off financially, with a tax revenue over £1,200,000. The manipulation of borough charters in the last years of Charles II's reign ensured that James' first parliament was dominated by loyal Tories.



James II ©

Parliament also voted James considerable emergency sums to suppress the rebellion raised by Charles II's eldest illegitimate son, the duke of Monmouth in June 1685. James' army of professional soldiers easily crushed the 3,000 to 4,000 rebels who joined Monmouth's cause.

Initial support for the king ebbed away as it became clear that he wished to secure not only freedom of worship for Catholics, but also the removal of the Test and Corporation Acts so that they could occupy public office.

Unease at the king's appointment of Catholic officers to the army forced him to prorogue parliament on 20 November 1685.

**In April 1687, James issued a declaration of indulgence, suspending penal laws against Catholics.**

James then attempted to secure his religious objectives through the use of his prerogative powers. The test case of *Godden vs Hales* (1686) established James' right to suspend the provisions of the Test Acts, thereby allowing the king to appoint a number of Catholic peers to his Privy Council.

In April 1687, James issued a declaration of indulgence, suspending penal laws against Catholics and granting toleration to some Protestant dissenters.

In the summer of 1687, James formally dissolved his parliament and began canvassing officials across the

country regarding their support for the formal repeal of the Test Acts. The information was used to begin a purge of corporations, aimed at producing a pliable parliament which would agree to the king's wishes.

These measures met with increasing opposition from the Anglican-Tory establishment.

In July, members of Magdalen College, Oxford were stripped of their fellowships for refusing to appoint the king's choice, Samuel Parker, a bishop who supported the repeal of the Test Acts, as their college president.

In May of 1688, seven leading bishops, including William Sancroft, Archbishop of Canterbury, refused to follow the order to read the king's second declaration of indulgence from their pulpits. James responded by having them arrested for seditious libel and taken to the Tower of London. Their acquittal at trial was met with widespread public rejoicing.

## **Dutch invasion**

The Anglican campaign against James II's religious policies went no further than passive resistance. But a number of English peers including the earls of Danby and Halifax, and Henry Compton, Bishop of London, went further, making contact with the Dutch leader, William of Orange.

Two factors moved James II's opponents to urge William to intervene militarily. Firstly, after years of trying, James' Catholic second wife finally fell pregnant. The birth of a healthy male heir, James Edward Stuart, on 10 June 1688, dashed hopes that the crown would soon pass to James's protestant daughter Mary.

Secondly, William's co-conspirators believed that the parliament James planned to summon in the autumn would repeal the Test Acts.

**William's main reason for interfering in English affairs was pragmatic – to bring England into his war against France.**

The grave danger posed to the Protestant succession and the Anglican establishment led seven peers to write to William on 30 June 1688, pledging their support to the prince if he brought a force into England against James.

William had already begun making military preparations for an invasion of England before this letter was sent. Indeed, the letter itself mainly served a propaganda purpose, to allow the prince of Orange to present his intervention as a mercy mission.

In fact, William's main reason for interfering in English affairs was essentially pragmatic – he wished to bring England into his war against Louis XIV's France and a free parliament was seen as more likely to support this.

The forces that the prince of Orange amassed for his invasion were vast, the flotilla consisting of 43 men-of-war, four light frigates and 10 fireships protecting over 400 flyboats capable of carrying 21,000 soldiers. All in all, it was an armada four times the size of that launched by the Spanish in 1588.

## **Revolution**

Aided by the so-called 'Protestant wind' which prevented James' navy from intercepting the Dutch fleet, William landed at Torbay, Devon, on 5 November 1688, the exact timing of his landfall neatly fitting with the anniversary of another celebrated moment when the nation was delivered from popery.

James had made military preparations for the defence of England over the summer and autumn of 1688 and his army encamped on Hounslow Heath was, at about 25,000 men, numerically larger than the force brought over by William. For the first time since the 1640s, England was faced with the prospect of civil war.

News of the prince's arrival had sparked off waves of anti-Catholic rioting in towns and cities across England. The civil unrest convinced James to leave London and bring out his forces to meet the invading army in a pitched battle.

**James made his first attempt to escape, but was captured by Kent fishermen near Sheerness.**

But the Orangist conspiracy against James had been maturing for years and had infiltrated James' own army, with the king's nephew, Lord Cornbury, one of the first to defect to William. At this point, James' health also deserted him. He was frequently debilitated by heavy nosebleeds.

Having reached Salisbury on 19 November with the intention of resisting William's advance, James had by the 23 November resolved to retreat back to London.

The desertions continued, with the defection of John Churchill, later Duke of Marlborough, and James' son-in-law, the Prince of Denmark on 24 November.

The final betrayal came on the king's return to his capital on the 26 November when he discovered that his daughter, Princess Anne had also absconded to join the Orangist side.

James now announced that he was willing to agree to William's main demand - to call a 'free' parliament. However, the king was now convinced that his own life was in danger and was making preparations to flee the country.

Meanwhile, William's advance upon the capital had met with some resistance - a bloody skirmish at Reading on 7 December with over 50 killed.

On 11 December, in the wake of renewed anti-Catholic rioting in London, James made his first attempt to escape, but was captured by Kent fishermen near Sheerness.

The king's capture was an inconvenience for William, who was now looked upon as the only individual capable of restoring order to the country, and on 23 December, with the prince's connivance, James successfully fled the country.

The 'convention parliament', made up of members from Charles II's last parliament, convened on 22 January 1689.

After considerable pressure from William himself, parliament agreed that he would rule as joint monarch with Mary, rather than act merely as her consort, and on 13 February William and Mary formally accepted the throne.

Before they were offered the crown, William and Mary were presented with a document called the Declaration of Rights, later enshrined in law as the Bill of Rights, which affirmed a number of constitutional principles, such as the illegality of prerogative suspending and dispensing powers, the prohibition of taxation without parliamentary consent and the need for regular parliaments.

In reality, the Bill of Rights placed few real restrictions on the crown. It was not until 1694 that the call for regular parliaments was backed up by the Triennial Act.

Pressure from William also ensured the passage in May 1689 of the Toleration Act, granting many Protestant groups, but not Catholics, freedom of worship. This toleration was, however, considerably more limited than that envisaged by James II.

## **Consequences**

If we take the revolution to encompass the whole of William III's reign, it certainly imposed limitations on royal authority.

Parliament gained powers over taxation, over the royal succession, over appointments and over the right of the crown to wage war independently, concessions that William thought were a price worth paying in return for parliament's financial support for his war against France.

William's wars profoundly changed the British state. Their massive cost led not only to growth of modern financial institutions – most notably the Bank of England founded in 1694 – but also to greater scrutiny of crown expenditure through parliamentary committees of accounts. The bureaucracy required to harvest all this money grew exponentially too.

**In Ireland and Scotland, the settlements were extremely politically and religiously divisive.**

The revolution's legacy might be seen as negative in other ways. In Ireland and Scotland, the revolution was militarily contested and its settlements extremely politically and religiously divisive. For example, Irish Protestants disregarded the generous peace terms of the Treaty of Limerick (3 October 1691) and established a monopoly over land-ownership and political power.

The revolution also failed to limit the power of parliaments and created no body of protected constitutional law. Therefore the Septennial Act of 1716 was able to effectively undermine the terms of the 1694 Triennial Act, ushering in the lengthy rule of a Whig oligarchy.

The revolution also fostered the growth of slavery by ending the Royal African Company's monopoly on the trade in 1698. For the non-white inhabitants of the British Atlantic empire, the Glorious Revolution represented not the broadening of freedom but the expansion of servitude.

## Find out more

### Books

*William III* by T Claydon (Longman, 2002)

*Revolution: The Great Crisis of the British Monarchy* by T Harris (Allen Lane, 2006)

*The Anglo-Dutch Moment: Essays on the Glorious Revolution and its World Impact* by J Israel ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2003)

*The Glorious Revolution* by J Miller (Longman, 2nd edn., 1999)

*The Glorious Revolution: A Brief History with Documents* by SC A Pincus (St. Martin's Press, 2005)

*England in the 1690s* by C Rose (Blackwell, 1999)

*James II* by WA Speck (Longman, 2002)

*The Glorious Revolution: 1688 and Britain's Fight for Liberty* by E Vallance (Little, Brown and Co, 2006)

## About the author

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