CHARLES I
AND THE ROAD TO PERSONAL RULE

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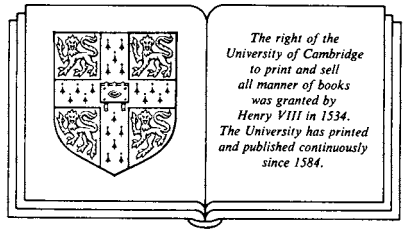

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Introduction

The reign of Charles I saw the complete breakdown of political consensus in his three kingdoms, the reluctant resort to armed conflict and the most extensive bloodshed. While historians, it would seem, are as far as ever from agreement about the reasons for these events, the period shows no sign of losing its ability to fascinate historian and reader alike. On one level the intrinsic interest of the Caroline regime derives from the fact of its collapse. To seek to understand the causes of the civil wars is natural enough. Yet this book, while it may shed some light on those later events, is not aimed directly at explaining the history of the 1640s. It focuses, rather, on those years during the late 1620s and early 1630s when Charles's rule was becoming established and its distinct character emerged. The intention is to achieve some understanding of the nature of that regime by investigating the problem of how it came into being. Beyond this, the course and collapse of Charles's rule were largely the products of its initial creation. And in this sense the book may also help to illuminate the Caroline period as a whole.

This study is built around the intersection of two basic themes: the interaction of political and ideological developments and the two-way relationship between English and international affairs. The evidence has encouraged me to view the problems of the period in these terms. Chronologically the book extends (roughly) from early 1628 to the latter part of 1632, that is from the height of the crisis of the Buckingham era to the time when Charles's withdrawal from the Thirty Years War was completed. This space of almost five years saw a marked transformation of English politics – from government in conjunction with Parliament to government without reference to Parliament; from the administration of a royal favourite to that of the king and his circle; from government dependent upon parliamentary subsidies and rising debt to government based upon non-parliamentary taxation, customs revenues and war trade; from intervention in continental affairs to isolation; and from war to peace. The point of Charles's withdrawal from the European war is a conclusive as well as a convenient *terminus ad quem*: the king's decision in favour of non-parliamentary rule implied the necessity of peace

abroad, and the progressive ending of a commitment to the war allowed the rejection of parliamentary means and the continuation of religious change at home.

Conrad Russell's detailed study of the parliaments of the 1620s, published in 1979, drew a sharp contrast between the political atmosphere of the Jacobean era and that which prevailed during the early years of Charles's reign. According to Russell the Caroline period was a new age, intensely ideological and politically 'a much less safe world'.[1] While recent work has pointed to the way in which overt religious consensus was being eroded in England during the last years of James's life,[2] there can be no doubt that this conclusion of Russell's is essentially true.[3] As religious and political divisions appeared in English politics during the late 1620s they came to affect significantly the framework in which those politics were pursued. This study, as part of its account of the emergence of Charles's regime, traces the development of certain changes evident at the end of the 1620s as the king came progressively to reject parliamentary ways. I have interpreted these changes as the advent of (for want of a better term) a 'new politics'. These new politics were an uncharacteristic and in many ways an unwanted (even an unconscious) development. They were the politics of a non-parliamentary England, politics which came about with the breakdown of the traditional political and constitutional process.

Such a notion immediately begs the obvious question of what, in fact, the old politics were. It is not my purpose to paint a full-length portrait of pre-Caroline, let alone early Stuart, political society. There exists a number of very illuminating studies which already serve this need.[4] It is possible, however, to point to certain features which made English political society workable under James I, notably confidence in the monarch as the head of the social and religious order, a degree of understanding between the ruling elements within the court and the wider political leadership of the nation, a broad ideological context for constitutional and religious life which, if sometimes unstable, was not undermined by government and often allowed official agreement rather than conflict, and the innate capacity for the con-

[1] C. Russell, *Parliaments and English politics 1621–1629* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 366, 420.

[2] K. Fincham and P. lake, 'The ecclesiastical policy of King James I', *JBS*, xxiv, 2 (1985). See also P. G. Lake, 'Calvinism and the English Church, 1570–1635', *P&P*, cxiv (1987); H. R. Trevor-Roper, *Catholics, Anglicans and puritans* (London, 1987), p. 62.

[3] R. P. Cust, *The forced loan and English politics 1626–1628* (Oxford, 1987). Despite the importance of Dr Cust's study of this period, I am unable to agree with his view that the pattern of English politics under Charles was fully established between 1626 and 1628 (ibid., pp. 332–3), given the period of transition charted in the present book. See also R. P. Cust, 'News and politics in early seventeenth century England', *P&P*, cxii (1986).

[4] See Russell, *Parliaments*, ch. 1; R. Ashton, *The English civil war* (London, 1978), pt 1; J. S. Morrill, *The revolt of the provinces*, 2nd edn (London, 1980), introduction, pt 1; D. Hirst, 'Court, country, and politics before 1629', in K. M. Sharpe (ed.), *Faction and Parliament, essays on early Stuart history* (Oxford, 1978).

duct of an effective foreign policy based upon an official commitment to the life of the Protestant world and upon the economical and constructive application of limited resources in time of war.[5] I have discussed these features, specifically and by implication, in seeking to describe the onset of the 'new politics' which supplanted them.

How can the new politics be characterized? Briefly, they involved an increasing resort to exclusive government, conspiracy and dissent at home, certain changes in political thinking (the most important of which was the undermining of the constitutional fiction that the king could – or should – do no wrong), and the eventual breakdown of the critical relationship between the administration of domestic affairs and foreign policy. In effect these developments constituted an internal assault on the customary framework of English politics and inherently weakened Charles's rule. In seeking to describe these changes I do not wish to suggest any rigid structural definitions. The idea of an emerging new politics is simply a flexible shorthand for the various changes (combined with elements of continuity) which can be detected within the period and which can, at the most basic level, be seen as a pattern of change, a pattern which should be illuminating. What caused these changes to emerge? In many ways they are inseparable from the specific policies which Charles adopted; essentially they were produced by the combination of his personality and beliefs (the effects of which were compounded by a grossly mismanaged war) with wider international influences. Somewhere within this book I suspect there lurks the deduction that if Charles had not succeeded to the English throne, had not been predeceased by his brother or had been assassinated like Henry IV of France (thus allowing Elizabeth of Bohemia and her children to enter the line of succession)[6] the troubles of his reign would have been avoided. While this seems a likely proposition, the imagined alternatives or 'ifs' of history, occasionally helpful, are not in the end a useful object of study. In terms of real events it is difficult to disagree with the conclusion reached by Clarendon in his history and by Pym in the Grand Remonstrance that Charles's accession led to increasingly serious trouble.[7] The king's character and attitudes form one of the salient themes of this book (and particularly of chapter 6). The portrait of Charles which emerges here is in many ways unflattering. Charles was an excellent connoisseur of the visual arts, but as a reigning monarch he was woefully inadequate. A major task of this book must be to explore the nature of that

[5] On the question of war finance see chapter 7, below.

[6] Elizabeth and her children were excluded from the immediate succession by the birth of the prince of Wales in 1630.

[7] Edward Hyde, earl of Clarendon, *History of the rebellion and civil wars in England*, ed. W. D. Macray (6 vols., Oxford, 1888), vol. i, p. 3; S. R. Gardiner (ed.), *The constitutional documents of the puritan revolution 1625–1660* (3rd edn, revised, Oxford, 1906, repr. 1979), pp. 208ff.

inadequacy: at very bottom he was an unsuccessful king because he was a weak man. But this study also contends that he was not in any sense a political man, something which his accidental involvement in public events has tended to obscure.

Within the European context the period which coincides with the span of this study was one of considerable transformation. There was a revival of Protestant fortunes and a concomitant decline in those of Spain, the reordering of the anti-Habsburg cause (previously a religious alliance in which England played a pivotal role) as a political alliance led by France, the development of an overriding conflict between France and Spain, the progress of economic warfare between Spain and the Dutch, and the great debate within the United Provinces on the possible truce with Philip IV.[8] International events had different meanings for the various interests on which they impinged. A notable example is Richelieu's consistent attempt to use the parliamentary interest in England to influence English policy, a political question for the cardinal but one which had extensive religious implications for Charles. At the international level it was ultimately England's relationship to Spain, to Spanish policy in the Low Countries and in Germany and to the Spanish war economy, which had the greatest influence upon internal English developments during this period.

To attempt to understand the interplay of political and personal forces with ideological ones is really to topple into a bottomless pit. No firm conclusions can be reached about the chemistry of individual men and women, the infinitely various mixtures of their emotions and thoughts. But since all conclusions are in varying degrees provisional there is a good case which can be made for informed speculation about human motives. The tendency to categorize the activities of individuals as basically either selfish or altruistic is a simplistic and unhelpful one based upon a false distinction: fear and ambition, for example, do not sit easily within this scheme.[9] Blair Worden has recently pointed to 'the frailty of the assumptions which historians still bring to the word "ideology", and the crudity of our approach to the relationship between self-interest and principle'.[10] Once the complexity of this problem has been recognized we are in a better position to investigate the evidence. We can remember that religious aspirations and reasons of state can co-exist in a grey area, very much the case in Europe during this period.[11] In another sense

[8] J. I. Israel, *The Dutch republic and the Hispanic world 1606–1661* (Oxford, 1982), ch. 4 (sections iv and v).

[9] L. B. Namier, 'Human nature in politics', in F. Stern (ed.), *The varieties of history* (London, 1970), pp. 385–6.

[10] B. Worden, rev. art., *London Review of Books*, 19 Apr.–2 May 1984, p. 15.

[11] J. H. Elliott, *Richelieu and Olivares* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 128; see also R. J. W. Evans, rev. art., *JEH*, xxxiv, 1 (1983), pp. 140–1.

personal ambition and intellectual conviction can develop, it would seem, almost as one: witness Sir John Eliot's frustrated desire for office and his belief in the prevalence of bad counsel in England, which, fused in his personality, were a major influence upon English politics during the late 1620s. And while ideological forces are by no means sovereign, their effects can be mitigated in unexpected ways. The policies which Charles adopted abroad, for example, were marginally less ideological than those he pursued at home. Emotive and irrational preferences often intrude upon and work alongside more thoughtful considerations. The initial failure of Charles's marriage came to influence his attitude to foreign policy far more than the failure of the projected Spanish match. The effect of unconscious inspiration, where it can be discerned, should not be forgotten. Clarendon understood that the English Calvinist counter-attack upon Laudianism appealed to a traditional axiom of political thought – the evil of innovation – although this was not fully applicable under the circumstances. The appeal was part of a process of coming to grips with a younger and weaker but increasingly native tradition (English Arminianism) which had achieved the patronage of the king.[12] Alert to complications such as these, we can endeavour to recognize the ways of thinking characteristic of groups and individuals, as well as to detect those points where certain ideas become independent and living forces, all the while remembering that ideological influences do not exist *in vacuo*, and seeking to point out their integration with the more human themes as best we can.

Any scholar who ventures into the pre-civil war era must acknowledge two historiographical debts. One is to Samuel Rawson Gardiner, whose masterly narrative remains the authoritative account of the events. While Gardiner's judgement upon individual episodes was often sound, his central constitutional theme remains implausibly simple and governed by an explicitly teleological approach.[13] But so assiduous was Gardiner's research and so wide his technical skill that to discover him to have been in error or to have been ignorant of certain evidence brings an almost perverse satisfaction. Understandably, the Spanish sources frequently yield information unknown to Gardiner; during the period in which he worked at Simancas the archive was apparently in an appalling state.[14] And our present knowledge is of course generally more extensive than that which Gardiner achieved. The other debt is to Conrad Russell, whose work on early Stuart parliamentary history has opened up whole new avenues of historical understanding. While

[12] Clarendon, *Rebellion*, vol. i, p. 123.

[13] 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), vii, p. 220.

[14] *DNB* (1901–11), s.v. Gardiner, Samuel Rawson; J. P. Kenyon, *The history men* (London, 1983), p. 118.

Russell has aroused controversy and a number of scholars have striven to qualify his conclusions, the illuminating insights he has provided mean that students of the period will always benefit from his scholarship and be obliged to grapple with his views.[15]

This book is directed towards understanding the evidence for its own subject rather than taking part in the controversy surrounding Russell's work. Nevertheless it will (I hope) make some form of contribution to that debate. It may be helpful, therefore, to give an indication of my own view of the Russellian or revisionist interpretation besides what appears in the following pages. That interpretation has both a negative and a positive character. It denies the validity of Gardiner's view of a high road to constitutional conflict, civil war and parliamentary power during the early Stuart period and rejects the hindsight which facilitated this reading of the era. Speaking positively, Russell argues that Parliament existed within the wider context of early modern English society and political culture and must be understood in these (its own) terms. That culture, he maintains, was founded on assumptions of order, unity and consensus but was plagued by problems of localism, war, financial inadequacy and religious disunity. My belief is that any polarization of the debate triggered by these views is unhelpful – not because disputes are unseemly (on the contrary: they show that the field of study is alive) but because it is in the nature of the early Stuart period that it is not conducive to simple, extreme or all-embracing explanations. The Caroline period is particularly complex in this respect, a growing jungle, formed by the intertwining of the politics of power and of deeply held belief within a European context. It is also my belief that the revisionist interpretation is weakened by its attempt to describe a structure or system of politics at a time when that system was undergoing significant change, being placed under pressure and being altered in subtle ways by national and international influences. Hence this study could be read as something of an alternative interpretation on a modest scale, or in another sense as an episodic sequel to the history of the 1620s, a decade of essentially parliamentary politics which led to the establishment of a non-parliamentary regime. The book contains elements of both themes. On a different level, all those who write after Gardiner, and after Sir Geoffrey Elton's thought-provoking article of 1965, 'A high road to civil war?',[16] are in a real sense revisionists.

[15] See in particular Russell, *Parliaments*, ch. 1; C. Russell, 'The nature of a Parliament in early Stuart England', in H. Tomlinson (ed.), *Before the English civil war* (London, 1983) and C. Russell, 'Parliamentary history in perspective, 1604–1629', *History*, lxi (1976). See also T. K. Rabb and D. Hirst, 'Revisionism revised: two perspectives on early Stuart parliamentary history' and C. Hill, 'Parliament and people in seventeenth century England', *P&P*, xcii (1981); R. Zaller, 'The concept of opposition in early Stuart England', *Albion*, xii (1980).

[16] G. R. Elton, 'A high road to civil war?', in Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart politics and government* (3 vols., Cambridge, 1974–83), vol. ii.

This book is a political study, rather than a specifically constitutional, theological, diplomatic or economic treatment. As with most political history it has the advantages of being eclectic in its subject matter and of dealing with the interaction of change and continuity. It concentrates on developments at a national and often at an international rather than a local level. It is really a study of English rather than of British history during this period, making brief reference to Ireland and casting but a passing glance at Scotland. Conrad Russell has recently drawn attention to the importance of the British problem in relation to the outbreak of the civil war.[17] But Russell has aptly described the kingdom of Scotland as being 'poor and despised' during the earlier years of Charles's reign.[18] The annual royal revenue in Scotland at this time was something over £16,000 sterling, less than the income of George, duke of Buckingham.[19] Charles left Scotland at the age of four, when his father became king of England, and did not return until almost thirty years later in 1633. The most significant episode in Scotland during the early years of his reign was his attempt to win a struggle with the Scottish nobility upon which his father had not even dared to enter. The Act of Revocation (1625) was intended as a re-annexation to the crown of gifts of Church property made by James as well as of grants made during Charles's minority. This enterprise was of dubious legality (it appealed to technical flaws in the ecclesiastical concessions and disregarded the fact that Charles had not succeeded as a minor) and ended in a compromise settlement in 1629.[20] But it left a legacy of mistrust among the nobility which worked dramatically against Charles when he and Laud later attempted to transform the established pattern of Scottish religious life. While Charles liked to maintain intimate relations with his Scottish relatives, particularly the duke of Lennox and the marquis of Hamilton who played important roles in England, his eventual failure in Scotland was the measure of his ignorance and neglect. The realm of Ireland had a more immediate relevance to English politics during this period. Mainly for religious reasons Ireland was clearly vulnerable to invasion during the Caroline war with Spain. It remained subject to the influences of continental politics throughout this period and was an important link between British and European affairs in a divided Europe. English Protestant perceptions of Irish Catholicism were a dynamic force. And the interregnum of the lords justices, between the departure of Falkland and the coming of Wentworth, was the occasion of a significant fightback by the Protestant interest at the

[17] C. Russell, 'The British problem and the English civil war', *History*, lxxii (1987).
[18] C. Russell, *The crisis of Parliaments, English history 1509–1660* (Oxford, 1971), p. 323; see also M. Lee, *The road to revolution: Scotland under Charles I, 1625–37* (Urbana, 1985).
[19] R. Mitchison, *Lordship to patronage, Scotland 1603–1745* (London, 1983), p. 29.
[20] Ibid., pp. 32–4; Gardiner, *History*, vii, pp. 276–81.

Caroline court, when Viscount Dorchester allied himself with the earl of Cork in a vigorous anti-Catholic crusade.

The loss of potential manuscript sources for the study of the early Caroline period has been extensive. Perhaps the greatest disappointment is the failure of any substantial collection of Lord Treasurer Weston's papers to survive. It is likely that his financial dealings (including those with Spain) and his Catholic leanings were considered sufficiently sensitive to warrant the premature demise of any such archive. The papers of the third earl of Pembroke were lost in a fire at Wilton in 1647. And it is possible that Providence Island Company documents were lost in government raids in 1639 and 1640.[21] This study is based on manuscript material in British and continental archives, particularly the Public Record Office in London and the Archivo General at Simancas, and on a variety of printed sources. Whatever the deficiencies of surviving evidence, this study is intended to shed fresh light on a fascinating era in British and European history.

[21] C. M. Hibbard, *Charles I and the popish plot* (Chapel Hill, 1983), p. 89.