

# James II and the Catholic Succession

Dr Joseph Hone in conversation with Dr John West

[www.stuarts-online.com](http://www.stuarts-online.com)

**Joseph Hone:** So I'm in the Fellows' Library at Jesus College, Oxford, with Dr John West. And we are looking at a set of Charles II's papers which were made public after his death. And these have interesting parallels with leaked papers from today in the private correspondence or emails of senior government ministers or indeed Prince Charles's private lobbying correspondence, which reveals some of the ways in which the next in line to the throne thinks behind closed doors. But John, to go back to the seventeenth century, these papers in front of us purport to be the personal papers written by Charles II on the eve of his death in February 1685. What do these papers tell us about Charles and why are they so important?

**John West:** Well the papers, as you say, they purport to be Charles's personal papers, specifically they are his spiritual deliberations, in the days and weeks leading up to his death at the beginning of February 1685. The important thing about them is that they reveal Charles's conversion from Protestantism to Catholicism. Charles describes in these papers that 'none can be that church but that which is called the Roman Catholic Church', and then they are printed, shortly after he dies.

**JH:** So we have a dead monarch whose faith is open to the public scrutiny.

**JW:** Yeah.

**JH:** Has that ever happened before?

**JW:** Yes it has. A previous example would be from 1640s during the civil wars when Charles I managed to leave a box of his own correspondence lying around on a battlefield, which was then promptly discovered by a parliamentarian. And that became a pamphlet called *The King's Cabinet Opened*.

**JH:** So provocative stuff then.

**JW:** Yes.

**JH:** Whereas these papers had been officially printed, right?

**JW:** Yes absolutely. So the person who actually discovered these papers apparently was James II, the brother of Charles and the new monarch who acceded in February 1685.

**JH:** So why would James want these papers out in the open?

**JW:** Well, unlike his brother Charles II, James was openly Catholic. It is difficult to know exactly what was going through James's mind in 1685-86 when he decided that it might be a good idea to instigate the publication of these papers. He may have been trying to prove that his brother, the deceased king, was a pious man, that his soul had been saved, perhaps. He may have been trying to advance his own spiritual agenda.

**JH:** Now, Catholicism is a contentious topic in seventeenth-century Britain. The majority of Britain was Protestant, and they regarded Catholics as tyrannical papists plotting the downfall of the established Church of England. Can you tell us a bit about this anti-popey in this period,

and how that affected James?

**JW:** Well for Protestants in seventeenth-century Britain, as you say, Catholicism it brings up these memories of violence, of tyranny. So for ordinary Protestant men and women in Britain, they may well think back to the recent, fairly recent history of Britain: to the rule of Mary I in the 1550s, when many Protestants were persecuted and burnt at the stake. They might think that the glorious reign of the Protestant Elizabeth I and how she rebuffed attempts by continental Catholic powers to conquer Britain, such as the Armada, Spanish Armada in 1588.

**JH:** What about the Gunpowder Plot?

**JW:** Yes, absolutely. You know, 1670, 1660s, 1670s, maybe the Gunpowder Plot is just about in living memory for some people. You know, this is an event that takes place in 1605 when Guy Fawkes and a group of other Catholic plotters want to blow up the Houses of Parliament with James I in it. And it's foiled at the last minute. To Protestants in Britain these are examples of God overseeing and protecting his chosen nation from Catholic aggression. Catholics are often thought to be plotting against the state, employing underhand tactics. Anti-Catholicism inculcates this kind of conspiracy theory mentality amongst many people in the population.

**JH:** So do we see that when the public learn that James, Duke of York, has converted to the Catholic Church? Does this trigger some paranoia and some mania among the Protestant majority?

**JW:** It does eventually, yes. As the 1670s go on and it becomes clear that Charles II isn't going to father a legitimate heir and therefore when he dies the crown is going to pass to his brother James, then the reality of a Catholic becoming king starts to hit people. So in the late 1670s this comes to focus around something called Popish Plot.

**JH:** The Popish Plot. So what was that?

**JW:** Well in the summer of 1678 a clergyman called Titus Oates claimed to have learnt that a new Catholic plot was underway, where thousands of Catholics were going to invade Britain; they were going to slaughter Protestants up and down the country; and they were going to forcibly reinstate the Catholic Church in Britain.

**JH:** But that wasn't true, was it?

**JW:** No, the whole thing was a fabrication. It turned out that Titus Oates was something of a fantasist. But what's important about the Popish Plot is that people believed it. Whether or not it was true, people on the ground in the late 1670s believed what he was saying. And it really scared people. And their fear began to centre around the figure of James, the prospective Catholic monarch of Britain. And this leads in the early 1680s to Parliament trying to pass a series of Exclusion Bills: these are bills that would seek to exclude James, Duke of York from the line of succession.

**JH:** But they couldn't do that, could they?

**JW:** No, this was quite revolutionary stuff really. What they wanted was to place one of Charles II's illegitimate children, James, Duke of Monmouth (a Protestant) in place of his brother, his Catholic brother James.

**JH:** So the key there is that we have a Protestant potential heir.

**JW:** Absolutely.

**JH:** But the Exclusion Bills didn't work, did they.

**JW:** No they didn't. So the House of Commons tries to push through Exclusion Bills in 1679 and again in 1680. The House of Lords rebuffs them. And eventually Charles II wins the upper hand

over those people who would be trying to exclude his brother from the lineage.

**JH:** Okay, so how did James negotiate this problem when he did finally come to the throne in 1685?

**JW:** Well initially he seems to have been very aware that his reign, his kingship was going to be viewed sceptically by many Protestants in the country, by ministers in the Protestant Church of England. And he does his best, I think, to try and accommodate them, to try to ease any worries that they may have had. And this is particularly evident in the first speech that James gives to the Privy Council. He delivered it *ex tempore*; he delivered it without notes. And in it he tries to reassure those members of the council who are Protestants that all of the rumours about him as a Catholic. He says that they're wrong: 'I have been reported to be a man for arbitrary power, but that is not the only story has been made of me and I shall make it my endeavours to preserve this government both in Church and in law established'.

**JH:** Which should reassure everybody, shouldn't it?

**JW:** Yeah, I think it did reassure people a lot. Members of the Privy Council who when they heard the speech they insisted that James had the speech printed and distributed around the country.

**JH:** So it goes viral.

**JW:** I suppose you could describe it as going viral, yeah. But in the first year of his reign, 1685 into 1686, James is actually a fairly popular monarch.

**JH:** So how is this popularity measured?

**JW:** Maybe the best way of measuring it would be to see how people came over to James's side in the middle of 1685 when he was faced with a rebellion.

**JH:** A rebellion?

**JW:** Yes. The illegitimate son of Charles II who some people try to elevate to the throne in the early 1680s, James, Duke of Monmouth launched a rebellion against James II in the summer of 1685. It was a Protestant rebellion. He was trying to depose a Catholic tyrant. And yet that rebellion simply did not gain much popular support at all. People rallied around the new king and the rebellion failed miserably and Monmouth ended up being executed along with many of his followers. The failure of that rebellion, especially given that four or five years earlier many people in the country were so scared of the possibility of James II, James, Duke of York as he was, becoming king, I think that's a measure of just how far the population reconciled themselves to James as monarch.

**JH:** So how then did James go within three years from being popular enough to withstand a rebellion to being deposed? What happened? What went wrong?

**JW:** Some of James's political decisions started to alienate those Protestants who he initially had managed to get on side. So, for example, he starts to appoint a number of Jesuits to key positions at court. The presence of these Jesuits at the court is deeply disturbing for many people in the country because Jesuits are seen as plotters really, are seen as people who worm their way into positions of power in order to instigate a Catholic takeover.

**JH:** Also if there is one thing that we've learned from looking back over the century of Stuart rule, it's that nobody likes court favourites.

**JW:** Oh absolutely, yes. It's very striking that when people do try to criticise James's reign, they often target the councillors, the favourites rather than James himself. Other things that James does over the course of the late 1680s which start alienate the Protestant population and the

Protestant ministers of the Church: he issues a Declaration of Indulgence.

**JH:** And the Declaration of Indulgence is a key moment isn't it, really?

**JW:** Absolutely. So he issues this Declaration in April 1687. The Declaration of Indulgence is essentially offering liberty of conscience to people of all faiths in the country: Protestants, Protestant dissenters (those people who were Protestants but not in the Church of England), but importantly also Catholics.

**JH:** I mean, that's a radical move.

**JW:** It is a radical thing. His brother had tried to do the same thing actually in the early 1670s. But he had been forced to rescind his Declaration by Parliament a year later because they were so outraged, partly at the prospect of offering Catholics liberty of conscience, but also because Charles in the early 1670s and James in the late 1680s, they were making these Declarations without the consent of Parliament; they were using royal prerogative. And that was the other important thing about the Declaration of Indulgence; it starts to look like a monarch acting quite arbitrarily.

**JH:** So on one hand we've got something that seems quite modern, quite liberal; and yet on the other we have a monarch who is essentially bypassing the democratic parliamentary system.

**JW:** Yes. I mean it is difficult for us in the twenty-first century to look back and kind of get into the mindset of people who would be so horrified by this idea of liberty of conscience because we think surely this is a good thing, you know. But yes, as you say, at the time the prospect of Catholic liberty of conscience simply they were ready for it really.

**JH:** So this is one of the key blunders that leads to James's deposition by his daughter and son-in-law in December 1688.

**JW:** Yes absolutely. It's hard to interpret what James is doing because, as I say, on one hand one wants to say well he was trying sincerely to advance this idea of liberty of conscience; and yet he seems to have completely misread the political will of the nation. He didn't seem to realise that by forcing this through, by forcing ministers to read the Declaration from the pulpit, that he might actually be solidifying opposition to him. To me, anyway, that seems to be a failure of political tact on James's part.

**JH:** Okay. So if we are to take the long view for a moment: what were the consequences of James's reign?

**JW:** Well I suppose the immediate consequence is it leads to the 1688 revolution. The key trigger for that probably is the birth of his son in the summer of 1688. I think people were willing to tolerate James's kingship just so long as it was apparent but he was going to be a one-off. As soon as the possibility of a permanent Catholic lineage sitting on the British throne became more likely, people were minded to take action.

**JH:** So how have historians looked back on James as a king?

**JW:** In a way, perhaps aside from Charles I, James II is maybe the most controversial monarch of the Stuart era.

**JH:** Controversial how?

**JW:** In that historians have offered a variety of very different interpretations of his rule from the nineteenth-century right down to the present-day. For a long time in the nineteenth century, James was thought about in the terms that William and Mary and their supporters talked about James: he was a prospective Catholic tyrant, as somebody who was restricting liberties, political and religious liberty in Britain. And his removal in late 1688 was seen as a necessary thing in

order to usher in this great history of British secular democracy. However, I think for historians today, James is not quite such a straightforward figure. There are some historians who have argued that James is actually a monarch who should be taken seriously as a great reforming monarch, a monarch whose ideas about religious toleration were sincerely held and in fact were deeply enlightened, that they anticipate modern ideas of spiritual freedom and toleration for all religion and all faiths. Yet other historians have argued that he was a politically radical monarch, a monarch who wanted to rule in the style of his Catholic counterpart in France, Louis XIV. And these arguments are raging very strongly today. In a way, the reign of James II and the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89 are two key topics for many historians working at the moment, and that debate I'm sure is going to be raging for a long time into the future.

**Bodleian items featured (by shelfmark):** Firth b.17 (15); Ashm. 1818 (4); MS Carte 71; 2 8. Jur; Nicholson Newspapers.