

Political Theory and the Glorious Revolution

Professor Paulina Kewes in conversation with Professor Justin Champion

www.stuarts-online.com

Paulina Kewes: I'm sitting here with Professor Justin Champion in the Fellows' Library of Jesus College, Oxford, and we are looking at some late seventeenth-century books and prints. Justin, James II came to the throne in 1685. He defeats the Monmouth Rebellion, designed to oust him, to prevent his accession. And yet within a few years he absconds; he is deposed; he is replaced by his own daughter and son-in-law. How did it all go wrong?

Justin Champion: It is one of the greatly understudied periods of late Stuart history. James II came to the throne initially upheld and lauded by everybody. He, as some of the images show, you know, he is a regal figure. He agrees to obey all of the laws and to defend the Church of England, as by law established. And the great testament to Charles II's power is that his Roman Catholic brother ascended to the throne without any initial opposition. You know, the parades through the streets of London acclaimed him. How can that be? But James was a good politician and recognised if he could get on board the nonconformists, the dissenters, the Quakers. (Who was James II's best friend? William Penn, the Quaker. He gave Pennsylvania to Penn). James II was tolerant. He recognised that Roman Catholicism had had bad press. But he also thought that Roman Catholicism was the most reasonable of religions. He wasn't too keen on the Pope himself. But he saw that the doctrine of Roman Catholicism (if English people could understand and read it) would persuade them. So bizarrely James II was the most tolerant king of the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

PK: So where did it all go wrong?

JC: Well I think, one, James liked Catholics too much. He intruded Roman Catholic ministers into high office. He intruded Roman Catholic clergy into the Oxford and Cambridge colleges, hacking off at one point Isaac Newton himself. He also believed that everybody should have a chance of using, if you like, the public space of religion. And this meant essentially he was anti-Anglican. He had said he would defend the Church as by law established. But he was trying to use Parliamentary means and his Declaration of Indulgence to change the nature of the law. So he had used his royal prerogative to say there is declaration of indulgence; anybody who is peaceable can worship. Oh and by the way, all you Anglican clergyman: you will read my declaration out from your pulpit.

PK: So was there overt opposition to James from the Anglican clergy?

JC: Absolutely. The Anglican clergy at, if you like, grassroots level just simply refused to read the declaration. But at senior level, the bishops, and famously the Seven Bishops, step up and say: we are not doing this; we are good godly Protestants and we will resist you.

PK: Justin, tell me more about the Seven Bishops?

JC: So the Seven Bishops are the senior churchmen of the day. And we have this wonderful image in front of us that has the Archbishop of Canterbury right at the centre and then the other figures, who are really figureheads. They are speaking on behalf of what they regard as the dominant Church of England. And of course they are prosecuted. They are put on trial. And we have got a beautiful image, but we should recall that there are playing cards, there are medals, there are a whole range of ephemera that support the Seven Bishops. Now this is a remarkable thing. The Seven Bishops. The bishops of the Church of England swore to obey always divine right kings. James II comes to the throne with God's providence. Romans 13: 'obey the powers that be'. What on earth are these bishops doing? Well they see themselves as defending true godly Protestantism. And they wouldn't like the word resistance; they are passively disobeying. It's pretty much resistance. And certainly it horrifies James II.

PK: You talked earlier about the resistance to James's accession. You talked about the Exclusion Crisis, and of course it is at that time we witness the emergence of political parties: so the Whigs and the Tories. The Whigs were those who oppose James's accession, or were in favour of exclusion; and the Tories ultimately support, were Stuart loyalists. Now how do the two parties behave after James's accession.

JC: It's one of the really peculiar aspects of late Stuart history, that many of the very radical Whigs many of the radical dissenting tolerationists support James's policies. You know, James puts them in charge of investigating Anglican persecution. And this is in one sense the horror that the Anglican Church confronts, because the tools of absolutism, the tools of the powerful Stuart prerogative are now being used not to support the Church of England, but to deconstruct it.

PK: So paradoxically the Tories become the resisters?

JC: Absolutely. And it is one of the things that the old-fashioned histories really had difficulty in coming to terms with. You know, for the great Whig historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth and twentieth century, the Glorious Revolution is a powerful act of political reason against Stuart tyranny. James II was trying to create a more tolerant society.

PK: Are the Anglicans objecting to positive discrimination?

JC: Certainly, if they're not objecting to active positive discrimination, they're objecting to them not being allowed to discriminate any more. Because we forget often the Church of England subscribes to a theory of persecution. And there's no point being sort of lilly-livered about it: the Church has the sword, the power of the keys, to discipline you. And if you don't conform, you can be discriminated against. What James II is saying is no, it doesn't work like that: as long as you're a peaceful citizen, as long as you use your reason, what's the problem? Well this is horrendous! And we've often forgotten that the word toleration, to us it's what we believe (although, you know, perhaps with some of the issues today, tolerating other people's religious difference is becoming a problem) but, for the seventeenth-century, toleration is a filthy word. If you tolerate people, this is the route to the Antichrist. James II pays for, legislates for, Acts of Toleration; and he is resisted by a Church of England who doesn't want that sort of diversity and are prepared... I mean the Seven Bishops were let off, much to James II's horror; you know, they weren't convicted and they were paraded through the streets of London, all of these wonderful images, you know. Every good Anglican, every conforming Anglican, would I think have had an image of the Seven Bishops—or at least one or two of them, you know, on their parlous wall. There were so many produced.

PK: Yes, I was wondering about the commercial dimension of it all. Who was making money out of it?

JC: I think that is a very very good point. And really from James's reign (it kicked off perhaps in the Exclusion Crisis), the production of visual culture and pamphlet literature is exponentially grows. And publishers make money, good money out of this. If you're very grand you have your Seven Bishops image coloured in. If you've got a bit more money you might buy a commemorative medal. If you're really extravagant, you might by teapot with the Seven Bishops sort of painted on the side. This is an age where the visual elements of political dispute are absolutely fundamental.

PK: Are they any images from the period that are severely derogatory to the king?

JC: There's an attempt, certainly, in much of the visual image and I think we have some of the material that was produced in Holland, because of course the Dutch are at the forefront of political caricatures. But James is increasingly represented as being in conspiracy with the papacy, with the antichrist. So there are wonderful images that you can see tracing back James's plot against true Protestantism, the conclave with the Jesuits, you know, going back to Guy Fawkes, going back to Mary.

PK: So ultimately would it be fair to say that your view of James II and of the arrival of William and Mary is very different from traditional historiography?

JC: Absolutely. I mean, I think there are more and more studies of James who would put him in a sort of modernising category, especially with some of his economic policies. But there is still a very dominant view (you know, we have only just escaped from the difficulties of the Troubles in Ireland) that Roman Catholicism was so out of kilter with the traditions of the Church that it is not possible to paint James: you know, he's a victim of his own success in one sense. If he had just kept quiet, had a few Catholics knocking around the court, he would have been okay. But he went one step further and tried to tolerate Quakers and all sorts of Protestant dissidents. And that meant challenging the authority of the Church.. But I think James has had a very bad press. William III and Mary come in as commonwealth figures who are going to protect true Protestantism.

PK: They are the liberators.

JC: They are.

PK: Deliverers.

JC: I mean the sort of themes of Providence and Protestantism are absolutely powerful. William III's fleet is kept, you know, safe by the Protestant wind that blows it into Torbay. Poor old James, you know, is minded to fight but is struck down by these terrible nosebleeds, so has to sort of not really fight. There were military engagements, but not as bad in England as elsewhere. You know, one of the things we've always got to remember about this succession issue is that while we don't want a filthy papist on the throne distorting and corrupting our Church of England, we do not want to return to the days of the Civil War when hundreds of thousands of people died. So there is a sort of polite agreement. You know, the Glorious Revolution, the respectable revolution.

Bodleian items featured (by shelfmark): Firth b.17 (15); Bliss B 365; Vet. A3 e. 844; E 4. 4 Art; Nicholson Newspapers; 2 8. Jur.