

The Warming-Pan Scandal

Professor Paulina Kewes in conversation with Dr John West

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Paulina Kewes: John, what was the wider historical significance of the Warming-Pan Scandal? how does it fit into the catalogue of Stuart succession crises?

John West: I think the wider significance of the Warming-Pan Scandal is as a cause, a major cause, of the revolution that took place in England in late 1688 and early 1689, a revolution that led one monarch, James II, to lose his throne, and another ruler, William of Orange, to take the English throne. It was also an event which, in a sense, led to the Stuart dynasty being split in two. James II, when he fled England for France, did continue to try to retake his English throne, although he always failed. On the other hand, Mary Stuart, James's daughter, ruled jointly alongside William of Orange on the English throne. I think that is another significant thing about the Warming-Pan Scandal, that leads to the Glorious Revolution, which in turn inaugurates a very novel constitutional settlement for England: having a joint monarchy, shared between William III and Mary II

PK: So what was the Warming-Pan Scandal about?

JW: Well it's a scandal revolving around the birth of a prince in the middle of 1688. On 10 June 1688, Mary of Modena, the queen of James II, the then monarch of England, gave birth to a son. He was called James Francis Edward Stuart, and he was the first born son of James II. So therefore he was going to be the heir to the throne. Now Mary's pregnancy have been announced earlier on in 1688. And it was an event that had been celebrated. Special prayers were said in church, hoping for the safety of the unborn child. And then, when the birth itself happened, it was widely celebrated. There was a spectacular fireworks display that took place on the Thames, and many congratulatory poems were written. So just as they are today, in the seventeenth century royal births were occasions for national celebration. And they were politically significant because they secured a dynasty. They secured political stability and continuity. However, not everyone was quite so happy about it. And the problem really revolved around religion. James II was a Catholic monarch. But he was a Catholic monarch in a country that been Protestant for over a century, where the idea of a Catholic dynasty was deeply problematic. England, after all, had been in conflict with many Catholic nations over the previous century or two, and events such as the Armada in 1588, or the gunpowder plot in 1605, or the so-called Popish Plot in the late 1670s, were all examples etched on the national memory of how Catholics were plotting and conspiring to bring down the Protestant nation of England. Now, for as long as James II looked like he was going to be one Catholic monarch who would be succeeded by his Protestant daughter from his first marriage, Mary, then people were happy to tolerate the idea of a Catholic king in a Protestant nation. However, as soon as the baby was born, the baby son was born, in June 1688, that meant that the idea of a Catholic dynasty was cemented. And this proved deeply worrying for many people in the country.

PK: So how did people respond to these fears?

JW: Well alongside all of the celebrations, we start to see the birth itself become subject to mockery and ridicule in the popular press. This was an attempt to cast doubt on the legitimacy of this new Catholic heir. So the focal points of a lot of this propaganda was the queen's body, was the body of Mary of Modena herself. One pamphlet, for example, argued that because the queen had suffered so much ill health in the past, she could not possibly have really been pregnant. Besides which, they carried on, the queen had not displayed the proper symptoms of a pregnant woman: she had not lactated, for example. So here we can see how the body of the queen was being opened up to public scrutiny in the press. And what about the baby himself? How was he depicted? Well he was also widely satirised he was thought to be an impostor, who had been smuggled into the queen's bedchamber in a warming-pan, that would normally contain hot coals in order to warm a bed but was also just big enough to hold a newborn baby. And there are many examples of prints and poems from the middle of 1688, where the image of the warming-pan becomes very prominent, often being positioned close to an image of the baby himself so as to imply that the birth was fabricated. So there's a sense that this 'so-called' birth was not something to be celebrated, but was in fact part of a Catholic conspiracy, an attempt to enforce upon the Protestant nation of England a new Catholic lineage. How did James II himself respond to this? Well the mockery became so widespread that he was forced to publish the testimony of around seventy witnesses to the birth, who could provide eyewitness statements that the birth was real. And yet even this was mocked. Versions of these witness statements were printed with asterisks written next to particular people who happened to be Catholics, so as to cast doubt on their neutrality. And poems were written about the witness statements that were gathered. One, for example, mocking how a lord peered between the queen's legs and saw a baby coming out.

PK: John, what were the consequences of this controversy?

JW: Well, importantly the rumours that this infant prince was an impostor were widely believed by the public. And it led to a number of noblemen and clergyman the Church of England to decide that they were no longer going to tolerate the idea of having a Catholic monarch in a Protestant nation. So they decided to issue an invitation to William of Orange, the Dutch ruler (or the Stadtholder). Now, William was a Protestant. He was married to Mary, James II's daughter by his first marriage. And William was invited to come to England, supposedly to protect the safety of the Church of England. William set off from Holland in October 1688 and he landed in England on 5 November 1688. Of course 5 November was a deeply auspicious date for Protestant men and women in England. So he landed in Torbay in Devon, claiming that he was arriving to protect English liberties and law from Catholic absolutism and tyranny. And over the course of the following few weeks, from November to December 1688, William made progress across the south of England from Torbay to Exeter, finally arriving in London on 10 December.

PK: So how did James react to William's invasion of his country? Because that's effectively what it was.

JW: Well James tried, initially, to confront William militarily, but failed. And when William came to London in the middle of December 1688, James II fled with his family, his wife Mary of Modena and her barely six-month-old child, to France. The baby that was born would later on in the eighteenth century, become known as the Old Pretender, the sponsor of Jacobite

rebellions in the eighteenth century. On the other hand, James would never set foot in England again during his lifetime. So, in a way, the birth of his son in the summer of 1688, an event that was so widely celebrated but also so widely ridiculed, set off a series of events that would lead the sitting monarch, the ruling monarch, of England to flee his kingdom and to be deposed by a foreign king.

PK: What was the impact of this crisis on contemporary culture?

JW: Well it led to an explosion of popular printed literature: ballads, visual imagery, prints, some of which were celebrating the event, others of which were satirising the event. So, in a way, you can see the division of the nation over this event through the volume of literature that is produced about it, and the different kinds of literature.

PK: So how did the major literary figures react to the birth of the new prince? What about Dryden, the Stuart Poet Laureate?

JW: Well the major writers in the country did write in celebration of the prince. Dryden, for example, wrote a poem called *Britannia Rediviva*, translated as 'Britain Reborn', which celebrated the birth of the infant prince. Aphra Behn also wrote a poem. In fact, Aphra Behn wrote a poem on the queen's pregnancy before she had even given birth to the baby. Then she wrote another poem once the birth had happened. And yet, there's almost a sense that the work of these major writers couldn't sustain its momentum in the face of this huge wave of popular literature that was being produced.

PK: Was anyone manipulating this propaganda?

JW: I think in one sense it was a genuine popular sense of (almost) outrage, this Protestant country [could be] could be becoming Catholic. But I also think it was probably being orchestrated from a higher level, if you like. I think William of Orange himself was keeping a very close eye on English political affairs throughout the summer of 1688. And, in a way, he probably saw the birth of the infant prince in the summer of 1688 as an opportunity to come to England and to depose a Catholic king.

Bodleian items featured (by shelfmark): Wood 660c; G. Pamph. 1747 (9); Wood 529 (15).