

Polgehroneon

The unrevolutionary revolution? Interpreting the Revolution of 1688

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John Morrill, one of the foremost historians of the British civil wars, has described the events of 1688-9 as the 'Sensible Revolution'.¹ The phrase captures the essence of a long-standing scholarly consensus, that this was a very unrevolutionary revolution.

The origins of this interpretation go back to the late eighteenth century and, in particular, Edmund Burke's *Reflections* (1790). Burke contrasted the violent, popular upheaval in revolutionary France with, as he saw it, the peaceful process which had seen the Catholic James II replaced as king by his Protestant son-in-law, the Dutch stadholder, William of Orange. For Burke, this 'revolution' did not involve a fundamental transformation of the English state. Instead, it restored and regenerated England's ancient constitution of King, Lords and Commons. This was effected not by the mob, as in France, but through Parliament: 'They acted by the ancient organised states in the shape of their old organisation, and not by the organic *moleculae* of a disbanded people.'²

In this narrative, William of Orange had landed at Brixham on 5 November 1688 to restore English liberties, threatened by the absolutist policies of the reigning monarch James II. James' flight from the kingdom in December 1688 had cleared the way for peaceful dynastic change, with William and his English wife Mary (James' eldest daughter) offered the throne as joint monarchs in February 1689. To ensure that no future rulers could threaten the English constitution in the manner of James, the new monarchs were presented with and accepted the Declaration of Rights along with the crown. This document, later incorporated into law as the Bill of Rights, defined the liberties of the subject and set out limitations on royal power. The revolution had been provoked by James' efforts to restore England to Catholicism and the settlement was also seen as ending the age of confessional warfare and religious persecution: the Toleration Act of 1689 granted freedom of worship to most Protestant dissenters. This presentation of the 'Glorious Revolution' (as it was then known) was repeated in countless nineteenth-century histories, including those aimed at schoolchildren.

This version of events survived largely intact until the 1980s when the tercentenary celebrations of 1988 prompted an important set of scholarly re-evaluations. The first notable casualty of the older interpretation was the idea that the revolution was 'glorious' at all. That label (first coined by John Hampden MP in November 1689) had been affixed to the revolution to indicate that, unlike the civil wars, political

change had been effected without bloodshed or damage to England's constitution.

However, revisionist scholars, notably Jonathan Israel, highlighted what had often been obscured in earlier histories of the revolution: William's mercy mission to England in November 1688 could easily be viewed as a Dutch invasion.³ The Dutch leader embarked on this expedition not to preserve English liberties, but because he wanted to bring England into a military alliance against Louis XIV's France. The fleet that had brought him across was four times the size of the Spanish armada of 1588. These ships transported an army totalling around 21,000 men which had clearly been recruited in order to challenge James' rule by force of arms. Indeed, it was only James' failure of nerve and decision to fly rather than fight that prevented England from descending into another civil war.

Even so, there were a number of violent skirmishes, such as that at Reading on 7 December between an advance guard of William's army and 600 of James' Irish dragoons. The disbanding of James' troops (without orders that they disarm first) itself provoked mass panic, resulting in something like an English equivalent of *la Grande Peur* – the 'Irish Fright' of 13-15 December which saw towns across England gripped by rumours of an impending massacre of Protestants at the hands of marauding Catholic Irish troops. Ultimately, it was force, the presence of Dutch troops in London, which would restore the order and military strength needed to ease William's path to the English throne.

The adoption of a British perspective on the revolution of 1688, exemplified by the work of Tim Harris, made the notion of a 'bloodless revolution' simply implausible.⁴ In Scotland and Ireland, the revolution was contested at the battles of Killiecrankie, the Boyne and finally Aughrim. Real massacres and atrocities (most notoriously the Glencoe Massacre of 1692), rather than merely imagined ones as in England, were the product of this 'war of kings'.

Yet, revisionist historiography, if anything, suggested that the actual political and religious changes effected by the revolution were even more limited than the traditional account had assumed. Revisionists pointed out that the demands embodied in the Bill of Rights, such as that for regular Parliaments, were not initially underpinned with any legal guarantees. The religious settlement too was hotly disputed and the toleration afforded by the statute of 1689

was actually more restricted than that offered by James II via his two Declarations of Indulgence.

Some of the most recent treatments of the period, however, have attempted to make the case for 1688 as a genuine revolution. Steven Pincus has argued that the events of 1688-9 constitute the 'First Modern Revolution', providing the essential template which all subsequent true revolutions have followed.⁵ For Pincus, 1688 was a titanic struggle between two competing factions both intent on transforming the English state: James II and his supporters who wished to create a French-style absolutist monarchy and the adherents of William of Orange who aimed at, and ultimately succeeded in creating, a new English state based around commerce and a more participatory model of politics.

We don't need to accept Pincus's argument completely to see the revolutionary impact the events of 1688-9 had wrought

upon English society by the end of the 1690s: a vibrant political culture, released (with the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695) from the shackles of pre-publication censorship, with regular and fiercely contested elections; an enlarged state, which had grown to meet the demands of supporting major wars; and, supporting this expanding state, new institutions, notably the Bank of England (founded in 1694) that provided the means to pay for the navy which in turn protected the merchant ships that brought in the customs revenues that financed the English state.

Burke may have been wrong to represent the revolution of 1688 as a peaceful and smooth process but ultimately he may have been right that it was this revolution which created the conditions that ensured England did not go down the same road as France in the late eighteenth century.

Designing enquiries to help pupils think about interpretations of the Revolution of 1688

Why have interpretations of the events of 1688 changed over time? At Key Stage 3 (11-14-year-old) students could explore this issue through enquiry questions such as the following: *Why couldn't people agree about the 'Glorious Revolution' in the eighteenth century? What do school textbook accounts of these events tell us about the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?* Students could explore the tercentenary debates about 1688 and ask *Why did politicians care so much about the Glorious Revolution 300 years' later?*⁶ A-level (16-19-year-

old) students could be asked to explore these questions but also to explore geographical and temporal complexity. To ask: *Why does 1688 mean different things in different parts of the British Isles?* A fascinating question that could help students draw on all their historical knowledge would be: *How might future developments affect our understanding of this aspect of the past?*

The Editors

Further reading

Books

- Harris, T. (2007) *Revolution: the great crisis of the british monarchy*, London: Penguin.
- Pincus, S. (2011) *1688: the first modern revolution*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Vallance, E. (2013) *The Glorious Revolution: 1688 and Britain's Fight for Liberty*. London: Abacus, Kindle edn.

Websites

- www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/civil_war_revolution/glorious_revolution_01.shtml
Survey of the events of 1688 on the BBC History webpages
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-tHvXuIaiw
Professor Steven Pincus discusses his book on the revolution of 1688
- www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/parliamentaryauthority/revolution/
Discussions of and links to the Declaration of Rights and Bill of Rights.

Fiction

Older students (16-19) might be interested in exploring *The Baroque Cycle* by Neal Stephenson, beginning with *Quicksilver* (2003), historical (science) fiction set in the period.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Morrill, J., 'The Sensible Revolution' in Israel, J. (ed.) (1991) *The Anglo-Dutch Moment: essays on the Glorious Revolution and its world impact*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 73-104.
- ² Quoted in Szechi, D. (1990) 'Mythistory versus History: the fading of the revolution of 1688' in *Historical Journal*, 33, pp. 143-53 at p. 143. A good electronic copy of Burke's *Reflections* is available here www.gutenberg.org/files/15679/15679-h/15679-h.htm#REFLECTIONS (accessed 13 May 2013).
- ³ Israel, J., 'The Dutch Role in the Glorious Revolution' in Israel (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp. 105-63.
- ⁴ Harris, T. (2007) *Revolution: the great crisis of the British monarchy*, London: Penguin.
- ⁵ Pincus, S. (2011) *1688: The First Modern Revolution*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- ⁶ Vallance, E. (2013) *The Glorious Revolution: 1688 and Britain's Fight for Liberty*. London: Abacus, pp.1-6.

This edition's Polychronicon was compiled by Dr Ted Vallance, Reader in Early-Modern History at the University of Roehampton.

Polychronicon was a fourteenth-century chronicle that brought together much of the knowledge of its own age.

Our Polychronicon in *Teaching History* is a regular feature helping school history teachers to update their subject knowledge, with special emphasis on recent historiography and changing interpretation.





Cunning Plan

When and for whom has 1688 been 'Glorious'?

An end-of-Year 9 enquiry about interpretations of the 'Glorious Revolution'

This enquiry is about how interpretations are formed and why they change. It aims to show Year 9, right at the end of their study of British history, the ways in which meanings of 1688 have shifted over time. It will test students' knowledge and strengthen their chronology of 300 years of British history. 1688 is explored from the perspective of five historical moments.

In history, as in fiction, the meaning of an episode is affected by the overall shape of the story of which it is a part. In fiction, the plot is a given, although readers may argue about its meaning. In history, by contrast, the 'plot' keeps changing since we are still *in medias res* and there is no end, strictly speaking, until human history ends. The 'Glorious Revolution' is an episode in the history of the British state that came to play an iconic role in the narratives of peaceful progress and gradualism mobilised to legitimate that state in its imperial heyday (the 'Whig interpretation of history'). 1688-9 events also came to play

foundational roles in other histories that were influenced by its legacy, such as the history of the United States where the Bill of Rights is very much alive in the form of the Second Amendment.

The 'meanings' of 1688 are tied up with these wider stories and raise a fascinating broader question, namely: what is the history of the British state a story *about*? Answers to that question are shaped by many things - not least, political values. There are as many answers to that question as there are moments in which the question can be posed.

Enquiry question: When and for whom has 1688 been 'Glorious'?

Lesson 1:

A sermon burned by a hangman: Whigs and Tories interpret 1688 in the early 18th century

In the 50 years after 1688, both *what* had happened and its implications for social and political order were fiercely contested. Had James II been resisted and ejected or had he merely vacated the throne? Had there been a 'revolution' at all?

Give pupils summaries of interpretations by Tories such as Sacheverell or Bolingbroke and by Whigs such as Walpole. How did their interpretations differ? Why? Why was Sacheverell put on trial in 1710 and banned from preaching for three years? Why was his sermon burned by a hangman?

Lesson 2:

1688 still controversial one hundred years' later

The loss of the American colonies and the French revolutionary wars made the late 18th century a troubled time for the British political elite.

After revising their knowledge of the late 18th century, ask Year 9 predict ways in which 1688 might have been viewed at that time. Then reveal those views using a series of small puzzles: What did Dr Richard Price say about 1688 at the Old Jewry in 1789? Why did it infuriate Edmund Burke? Why did Burke's reaction lead to Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* in 1791 - the first mass political best seller and a book thought so dangerous that Paine had to flee the country? Why was Paine's book burned, just as Sacheverell's sermon had been?

Lesson 3:

How could one history book be so important? Macaulay's *History of England*

The first two volumes of Macaulay's *The History of England* were published in 1848. England had no revolution in Europe's 'Year of Revolutions' and by the end of 1848 Chartism was a spent force. Gradualism, evolution, order and parliamentary government appeared to triumph (just as they had in 1832) and, as the Great Exhibition of 1851 would show, to preside over astonishing, world-beating progress.

Give out extracts from Macaulay's account of the 'GR'. Students contrast it with accounts already explored. How does Macaulay interpret 1688-9? Why would his interpretation have appealed to English readers in the second half of the 19th century?

Lesson 4:

An argument in the House of Commons ... in 1988

Give students extracts from the Hansard debate of 7 July 1988. Why did MPs debate a 'humble address' celebrating the tercentenary? What was Margaret Thatcher's interpretation of events? Why did others disagree? What did they all have in common?

Lesson 5:

1688 ...in 2038

How might things look 350 years on? How might future developments in British constitutional history (THINK: Europe? devolution and independence...?) affect the stories told in future? What might 1688 yet come to *mean*?

Finally, students write their answer to the whole enquiry question: When and for whom has 1688 been 'Glorious'?

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