

The Glorious Revolution

It is more than likely that you have seen a painting on the gable wall of a house or in some other prominent place of a king riding a white horse. You may also have noticed on the same painting a date included – 1690.

The painting is of a king called William and the date identifies the period we are considering in this lesson. Our subject is “The Glorious Revolution”.

What kind of revolution was this?

Our present Queen came to the throne because her father had been king before her. She inherited the crown and the throne of the United Kingdom when her father died.

But William did not inherit the monarchy in that way. He was not even an Englishman. And in William’s day there already was a king reigning in England, Scotland and Ireland. His name was James. So William could only become king if James was removed and William replaced him. This is what happened and this change is called a revolution.

When we talk about the technological revolution we are referring among other things, to the great changes which have taken place in the way we communicate with each other. Some of us used to communicate by writing letters with pen and ink. Now we use email or text or social media. There has been a communications revolution! One form of communication was replaced by another.

So it was in these kingdoms in 1688. One king was removed and was replaced by another king.

Why did this revolution take place?

James II was a fervent Roman Catholic and when he came to the throne it was his intention to impose Roman Catholicism and its practices on the whole nation. He attempted to bypass the Parliament and ignored the concerns of his Protestant subjects. He acted as a despot.

The people, needless to say, reacted against such tyranny and in June 1688 some of the leading nobles and members of Parliament formally invited William, Prince of Orange and son-in-law of James, to come and deliver the nation from the tyranny of King James.

William landed at Torbay in the south of England in November 1688. He came with a large army of one thousand three hundred men, most of whom were Dutch. On his arrival William announced that he had not come to claim the throne. His intention was to deliver Britain from “despotism and Popery”.

In England there was a great sense of relief that James had been forced to flee and there was the prospect of greater liberty and religious freedom.

In Scotland too, after some resistance from a few Scottish bishops, the revolution proceeded relatively easily. And the Scottish Parliament (the “Estates”) which met in March 1689 proclaimed William as King and his wife Mary as Queen.

Though the majority in Scotland were relieved to be rid of James, he still had some supporters particularly in the Highlands. They were led by Claverhouse the man who had so cruelly persecuted the Covenanters.

Claverhouse himself was killed in battle in July 1689 and a month later the Cameronian Regiment, made up mostly of Covenanters, achieved a great victory at Dunkeld which secured the success of the revolution in Scotland. One historian has suggested that this

victory for Protestantism “could never have been achieved apart from those bonny fighters”.

Was this revolution successful?

William's victory is popularly known as the “Glorious Revolution” which certainly suggests that it was a great success.

There are indeed many ways in which this is true. The citizens of England, Scotland and Ireland now enjoyed real civil and religious freedom. They lived under a “legitimate limited monarchy”. That means that the king could not just act as he wanted. No king of the United Kingdom could any longer behave as a tyrant in the way James had.

Following 1689 Covenanters who for years had been persecuted for their faith now had the freedom, along with everyone else to worship and practise their faith without fear of being hindered or attacked.

The position which the Covenanters held for years and for which they suffered greatly was now recognized by the Parliament in England and Scotland. In a real sense, the Covenanters were proved to have been right all along.

You would expect that the Covenanters would have been delighted with these great changes. And so they were, but not entirely.

There were things about the Glorious Revolution which disappointed the Covenanters.

They were disappointed that parliament did not state clearly that Presbyterianism is the only true form of church government.

They were disappointed that the Covenants of 1638 and 1643 were ignored and particularly that there was no real recognition of the Kingship of Christ in church and state.

They were disappointed that the state was given too much authority within the church.

So for these, and other reasons, the Covenanters remained as a separate body, outside the Church of Scotland which was established at the Revolution.