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THE FORGOTTEN TRICENTENNIAL: ENGLAND'S GLORIOUS REVOLUTION

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Three hundred years ago, around 3 a.m. on Tuesday, Dec. 11, 1688, James II, King of England, arose from his bed in Whitehall Palace. He dressed in disguise as a commoner--plain garb, an old cloak, boots, a short black wig, and a patch on his left upper lip--and silently departed through a secret passage. Attended by a handful of servants, the King boarded a rowboat on the Thames River.

When he entered the boat, the King was clutching the Great Seal of England, recently received back from his hated and cruel Lord Chancellor, the infamous George Jeffreys. As the boat glided to the middle of the river, the King with his own hands flung the Great Seal into the water, where it sank. The following spring the Great Seal would be accidentally retrieved by fishermen who caught it in their net, "Heaven seeming by this accident to declare that the laws, the constitution, and the sovereignty of Great Britain were not to depend upon the frailty of man," one historian later remarked.

Prior to crossing the river, the King in another destructive act had personally thrown the writs necessary for summoning a scheduled Parliament into the flames of a palace fireplace.

Mistakenly confident that government functions now would be paralyzed in his absence, the King arrived at the opposite shore and mounted a horse waiting in the darkness to take him to the seacoast where a sloop was supposed to transport him and his companions across the English Channel to France.

What Was the Glorious Revolution of 1688?

This attempt of King James II to flee England was to end in humiliating failure. In a spectacular development the King and his small entourage were captured by fishermen--one of the numerous wondrous events occurring in England in the year 1688, the marvelous year of the Glorious Revolution. Because of the amazing way that revolution unfolded, the people of the time regarded 1688 as *annus mirabilis*, the year of the marvels (or miracles). For the same reasons the revolution that occurred that year in England was almost immediately known by unique name--the "Glorious Revolution."

The 300th anniversary of the Glorious Revolution has attracted little attention, even though it is landmark in history. The Glorious Revolution checked the power of the monarchy, paved the way for the rise of cabinet government and parliamentary democracy, and resulted in enacted of the English Bill of Rights--some of whose provisions (such as those forbidding cruel and unusual punishments, excessive fines, or excessive bail) later found their way into the American Bill of Rights in our Federal Constitution.

Englishmen living 300 years ago believed that the Glorious Revolution was “a thing that cannot be paralleled in history,” whose greatness would be recognized “till time shall be no more.” They undoubtedly would be surprised to discover that the tricentennial had and gone with so little public awareness or interest.

The Glorious Revolution was the political and governmental upheaval that shook England in 1688. Through a remarkable series of jolting events King James II, England’s last Roman Catholic sovereign, lost his throne in December 1688; and the English crown was transferred to his own son-in-law and daughter respectively, William and Mary, Prince and Princess of Orange in the Netherlands, who on Feb. 13, 1689 began ruling England jointly as King William III and Queen Mary II.

The Glorious Revolution of 1688, swift, bloodless, and one of the mildest, most benignant revolutions in history, began in the spring of 1688 with several conspiracies against James II by his political enemies and various military officers, and became irresistible by Nov. 5, when the Prince of Orange’s invasion fleet appeared off the coast of Devonshire in western England and began landing an army in what history records as the last successful invasion of England. It is said James II was in the presence of his courtiers when he opened and read the dispatch confirming William’s landing. All the blood is said to have left his cheeks, and he dropped the dispatch and was speechless for some time.

The Glorious Revolution ended three months later on Feb. 13, 1689, when William and Mary were officially proclaimed the new monarchs in London by a convention specially assembled in lieu of a Parliament. By then the deposed James II was living in exile in France, a guest of French King Louis XIV.

The term “Glorious Revolution” was coined less than a month after the accession of William and Mary. The term first appeared in a letter written by one of the deposed James II’s former ministers of state, dated Mar. 8, 1689.

Some Events in the Miraculous Year 1688

When the year 1688 began, King James II was 54 years old, prematurely aged, one of those dull, stubborn persons who cannot learn from their mistakes. He had been on the throne for three years. As the year progressed, James committed a series of major blunders and illegalities which steadily eroded his political support, leaving him isolated and unpopular.

In April 1688 James provoked the crisis by issuing a royal proclamation purporting to suspend enforcement of certain laws duly enacted by Parliament. He also announced his intention of filling up government offices with fellow Catholics, even though Catholics were disqualified from holding offices under anti-Catholic laws then on the books.

In May 1688 James II aggravated matters by ordering the Church of England to read the royal proclamation during divine services. On Friday, May 18 the 77-year old Archbishop of Canterbury, William Sancroft, and six other Anglican bishops privately presented the King with a respectful petition begging to be excused from this. James flew into a rage. When the proclamation was not read in the churches as he had directed, James had the Seven Bishops (as they were soon known) arrested on Friday, June 8 and confined in the Tower of London for exactly one week, then released on bail to await trial on misdemeanor charges for having presented their petition to the King. To James II, humble petitioning was seditious libel. The arrest, imprisonment, and prosecution of the bishops amazed the English people.

The Trial of the Seven Bishops in the Court of King's Bench was the greatest and most memorable common law trial in history. The trial began on Friday, June 29, and amidst cheers the jury returned a verdict of acquittal the next day. The trial occurred in the midst of growing public excitement and consternation, and was attended by an overflowing crowd, including many peers of the realm. The acquittal was widely viewed as a crushing rebuke to James II, who predictable comment on the acquittal was: "So much the worse for them."

While the bishops were in the Tower another unexpected event happened. James II was thought to be "diseased," and his wife was thought incapable of having healthy children and also thought not to be pregnant. But suddenly Queen Mary of Modena, James's wife and England's only Italian queen, gave birth to a boy on Sunday, June 10. Since the baby was sure to be raised Catholic, the people of England now faced the grim prospect that James II's unpopular and unlawful policies would survive him. (Prior to the boy's birth,

the first in line to the throne was Mary, Princess of Orange, James's eldest and Protestant daughter by an earlier marriage.)

William of Orange Invades England

Meanwhile, across the water in Holland, William, Prince of Orange, was carefully following events in England and secretly contemplating the possibility of dethroning James II. William knew that if somehow he could ascend the English throne, he would be in a position to cause England to join on the side of the coalition against France—the generally European war that was looming and actually broke out in late 1688.

William, 37 years old, was married to Mary, the daughter of James II. Until the birth of James II's son on June 10, Mary was first in line to the English throne. William himself was third in line to the English throne before the birth of James II's son, and fourth afterward. William had long been closely involved in English politics with English politicians. By 1688 he had become the acknowledged leader of much of James II's political opposition.

Unlike James II, who was tall, handsome, and fair, William was short, sickly, and noted for his aquiline nose. Imperturbable, laconic, sagacious, William was one of the greatest of all European statesmen, and individual of extraordinary daring and foresight. His life was dedicated to humbling the might of France and the glory of Louis XIV, his deadliest enemy. As fellow Catholics, Louis XIV and James II were close allies.

In May 1688 a representative of one of the conspiracies against James II paid a secret visit to William at the Hague. William was not asked to dethrone James II. He was asked to come over to England with soldiers to rescue the people from the oppression of James II. William replied that if he were specifically invited by a sufficient number of important Englishmen, he thought he could be in England by September. On June 30, the very Saturday the Seven Bishops were found not guilty, that invitation, signed by seven English politicians later known as the Immortal Seven, was dispatched to William by secret courier. William immediately ordered military and naval preparations for the invasion of England. He remained silent concerning his secret intention to dethrone James II.

William's fleet of 50 warships and 300 transports carrying 7,000 sailors, 14,000 troops, 4,000 horses, and hundreds of tons of supplies, set sail from Holland on Thursday, November 1. William himself sailed on board a warship that led the fleet. The winds blew favorably, and soon the invasion fleet was in the North

Sea. Avoiding the English fleet sent to intercept it, the Dutch fleet sailed through the English Channel on Saturday, Nov. 3, and on Monday, Nov. 5, arrived off Torbay, in Devonshire (in the West of England), where the army immediately disembarked.

The story is told that upon setting foot on land, William, a gloomy Calvinist who seldom wisecracked, turned to his chaplain and joked: “Well, Doctor, what do you think of predestination now?”

Once his army was safely on English soil, William began an unhurried march toward London, less than 200 miles away. Support for William grew all over the country, while support for James II evaporated. Many of James II’s supporters fled to the continent, while others retired to their homes and laid low. After his leading military commanders and many other military or civilian officers deserted to William in late November and early December, James II decided to send his wife and 6-month old baby in secrecy to France. James’s wife, Queen Mary of Modena, left the palace around 2:00 a.m. on Monday, Dec. 10, 1688, a cold, windy, and rainy night. She carried her infant son in her arms and was attended by a handful of servants and escorts. The following night, after confirming that his wife and son had safely sailed for France, James II burned the Parliamentary writs, picked up the Great Seal of England, and slipped out of his palace and began his own attempt to flee to France.

The King of England Seized by Fishermen

Queen Mary of Modena made it safely to France, but the King’s attempt to flee failed in humiliating fashion. Late that Tuesday morning, Dec. 11, the King on horseback arrived at the Kentish coast and boarded a small sloop; but because of strong winds the pilot refused to sail. Shortly before midnight, just as the sloop was finally about to sail, 50 armed fishermen in three fishing boats suddenly approached the sloop, boarded it, and captured, robbed, and insulted the persons on board, including the disguised King, who was not recognized. At gunpoint the King of England was made to turn out his pants pockets.

On the morning of Wednesday, Dec. 12, the King and his party were taken to a nearby fishing village, where the King was recognized and they were detained in a private house until Saturday, Dec. 15.

During the time he was detained, James II suffered a nervous breakdown. He wept. He beseeched. He even feigned happiness. One who saw the King in the village wrote: “I observed a smile on his [the King’s] face, of an

extraordinary size and shape, so forced, awkward, and unpleasant to look upon, that I can truly say I never saw anything like it.”

James II Successfully Escapes to France

James II returned to his palace in London on Sunday, Dec. 16. Two days later he was required to leave town by William. Shortly after the King left London for the last time, William entered London, received as a liberator.

Among other deputations, a group of distinguished lawyers came to greet William once he was lodged in St. James's Palace, where James II's son had been born six months earlier, and where William had married Mary back in 1677. Speaking to John Maynard, a famous 90-year old lawyer, William said complimentarily: “Sir, you must have survived all the lawyers of your time.” Maynard's brilliant reply impressed everyone present: “And had Your Highness not come over, I should have survived the laws too.”

James II went to Rochester, where for a week he remained an honorable prisoner in a home now known as Abdication House. In the early hours of Sunday, Dec. 23, James II again arose from a bed at dead of night, stole out a back door, rode on horseback to the seacoast, and boarded a smack--a single-masted mackerel fishing boat--which conveyed him to the French coast. He and his few attendants arrived near Calais on the following Tuesday, Christmas day.

The deposed James II remained in French exile until his death in 1701. He was the last English sovereign to claim to rule by divine right.