

Charles II - 'Never said a foolish thing , nor ever did a wise one'

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In order to answer the question of how to evaluate the reign of Charles II , first I would like to talk about its most important events , then I will try to judge them whether they can be regarded as 'wise' or as 'foolish' things.

Charles II returned to England in 1660. The people were tired of Cromwell's Protectorate and the majority approved of recalling the king.

The king was clever enough to be cautious with taking vengeance. He punished only the murderers of his father , which was a wise thing to do , and he turned out to be a good tactician in his further policy too. The historical situation was quite complicated so he really needed this ability to balance between the opposing groups of British society.

The start of his reign was quite promising , but his repeating efforts of toleration were quite suspicious for the public . Many people thought that he had been converted to Rome during his exile , but we know that he was not received into the Catholic Church until he was on his deathbed (1). The strongly Anglican Parliament was always afraid that he would become a Catholic , (and his final converting confirmed this belief). That was the reason why it passed the Test Act in 1673 , which forbade Catholics to hold public office. The other result of this fear was the appearance of the political parties , the Whigs and the Tories (2).

The most serious mistakes he made were in connection with his foreign policy . "He was glad of any opportunity to enhance the power of the monarchy , but unlike his brother James he gave no continuous thought to it" (3). He led a war against the Dutch who were England's main trading competitors between 1665 and 1667 , despite the fact that the previous war against them (1652-1654) was a failure. This war was absolutely

unnecessary ,
 it only happened because Charles gave New Holland to his brother as a present
 . Although England got New York after the war , its effects together with the
 Plague of 1665 and the Great Fire in 1666 were disastrous on public morale. He
 was a good tactician but a poor strategist and it can be doubted if he had a
 long-term policy at any stage (4).

In 1667 Louis XIV. tried to take advantage of the Anglo-Dutch war claiming part of the
 Spanish Netherlands and only an anti-French coalition could stop him. The Triple Alliance , which
 consisted of
 England , Holland and Sweden , was not supported by the Parliament because they
 still did not trust the king and because they had strong feelings against the
 Dutch. The public wanted a third war against Holland and it happened this time
 in alliance with France : the Treaty of Dover was signed in May 1670.
 (5)

"This treaty has always been regarded as Charles II's bane. But it was a realistic and perfectly workable agreement for the
 dismemberment of the United Provinces , by now equally odious to both nations ,
 and it was to England's natural advantage rather than France's"(6). Charles also promised in a secret clause to declare himself as a
 catholic at
 the appropriate time and even that the whole nation would convert , giving
 Louis and the involved ministers a potent blackmail weapon for the future .(7)
 That was a really serious mistake. Charles had strong financial reasons
 , because Parliament did not give him enough money and the King of France paid
 him a large sum of money for it. But it was a vicious circle , because he gave
 another reason not to trust him . After this came out fears of the Catholic
 danger strengthened and because of efforts to exclude James from the succession
 this period is called the Exclusion Crisis.

The king's brother , James , had been converted to Rome in 1668 and rumours about a Catholic plot to murder Charles and put him
 on the throne, which were in fact spread by Parliament to frighten people , led to the
 second Test Act of November 1678 , excluding Catholics from Parliament and the
 Court. However , it could not prevent James from inheriting the crown because
 "... Charles would not allow any interference with his brother's divine right to be king."(8)

On the one hand , although he shared his father's belief in divine right , he
 was much more calm , sober and broad-minded. He had learnt from the past and always

managed to avoid an open break with Parliament, but unlike his father he at last had an army to control. He was also more patient and realistic comparing to his brother and successor, James, especially at dealing with religious problems. He was the most enlightened Stuart and he greatly admired Louis XIV, the magnificent absolute ruler of France.(9) He patronized arts and he established the Royal Society. London's rebuilding after the Great Fire in five years was also due to him.

On the other hand, although the monarchy had been given a completely new start, he wasted all his chances. "He was not a lazy man, but he lacked concentration, his interests were too diversified, and he did not apply himself to the business of governing."(10) He left much of the responsibility to his chief minister, Clarendon, ignoring his father's last advice, which was not to trust too much in a single minister. In addition he had the usual Stuart failings: he did not understand finance, he had heavy over-spending on the court, and he was a bad public speaker.(11) His marriage to Catherine Braganza, even it was tactically reasonable because of the dowry including Bombay and Tanger, also strengthened people's suspicion of his Catholic feelings. Finally, all his European interventions were failures, even if they were taken much more seriously than his father's.

Although his reign was full of contradictions, in my opinion it was obviously a positive phase in British history because "... England had forged a new military and commercial machine, and her presence in Europe was enormously enhanced."(12)

: Stuart England p.
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(2) David McDowall : An Illustrated History of
Britain p. 94

(3), (4) J. P. Kenyon
: Stuart England p.212

(5),
(6)
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p.221

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p.223

(8) David McDowall : An
Illustrated History of Britain p.95

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p.93

(10) J. P. Kenyon
: Stuart England p.211

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(12)
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