

Lineages  
of the  
Absolutist State

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Typeset in Monotype Fournier  
and printed by Western Printing Services Ltd, Bristol

The extinction of the Tudor line in 1603, and the advent of the Stuart dynasty, created a fundamentally new political situation for the monarchy. For with the accession of James I, Scotland was for the first time joined in a personal union with England. Two radically distinct polities were now combined under the same ruling house. The Scottish impact on the pattern of English development appeared initially very slight, precisely because of the historical distance between the social formations; but in the long-run it was to prove critical for the fortunes of English Absolutism. Scotland, like Ireland, had remained a Celtic fastness beyond the bounds of Roman control. Receiving an admixture of Irish, Germanic and Scandinavian immigration in the Dark Ages, its variegated clannic map was subjected to a central royal authority, with jurisdiction over the whole country except for the North-West, in the 11th century. In the High Middle Ages the impingement of Anglo-Norman feudalism here too recast the shape of the indigenous political and social system: but whereas in Ireland, it took the form of a precarious military conquest that was soon awash with a Celtic reflux, in Scotland the native Canmore dynasty itself imported English settlers and institutions, promoting intermarriage with the nobility to the South and emulating the structures of the more

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developed no absolutism.' He added in a characteristic phrase: 'Land power produces an organization that dominates the very body of the state itself and lends it a military form. Sea power is merely an armoured fist thrust out into the world beyond; it is not suitable for use against an "internal army".' *Gesammelte Abhandlungen*, I, pp. 59, 72. Hintze himself, a keen advocate of Wilhelmine naval imperialism before the First World War, had good reasons for his sharp attention to English maritime history.

31. Costs per man in the next century were twice as high on sea as on land; a navy also, of course, needed a much more advanced supply and maintenance industry. See Clark, *The Seventeenth Century*, p. 119.

advanced kingdom on the other side of the Border, with its castles, sheriffs, chamberlains and justiciars. The result was a much deeper and more thorough feudalization of Scottish society. Self-imposed 'Normanization' eliminated the old ethnic divisions of the country, and created a new line of linguistic and social demarcation between the Lowlands, where English speech came to stay, together with manors and fiefs, and the Highlands, where Gaelic remained the language of a backward clan pastoralism. Unlike the situation in Ireland, the purely Celtic sector was permanently reduced to a minority, confined to the North-West. During the later mediaeval period, the Scottish monarchy in general failed to consolidate royal discipline over its dominions. Mutual contamination between Lowland and Highland political patterns led to a semi-seigneurialization of Celtic clan leadership in the mountains, and clan infection of Scottish feudal organization on the plains.<sup>32</sup> Above all, constant frontier warfare with England repeatedly battered the royal State. In the anarchic conditions of the 14th and 15th centuries, amidst ceaseless border turmoil, barons seized hereditary control of sheriffdoms and set up private jurisdictions, magnates wrested provincial 'regalities' from the monarchy, and vassal kin-networks proliferated under both.

The successor Stuart dynasty, dogged by unstable minority and regency governments, was unable to make much headway against the endemic disorder of the country in the next hundred and fifty years, while Scotland became increasingly tied to diplomatic alliance with France, as a shield against English pressure. In the mid 16th century, outright French domination through a Guise regency provoked an aristocratic and popular xenophobia that provided much of the driving-power for the local Reformation: towns, lairds and nobles revolted against the French administration, whose lines of communication to the continent were cut by the English navy in 1560, ensuring the success of Scottish Protestantism. But the religious change, which henceforward set Scotland off from Ireland, did little to alter the political complexion of the country. The Gaelic Highlands, which alone remained loyal to Catholicism, became even wilder and more turbulent

32. For this process, see T. C. Smout, *A History of the Scottish People 1560-1830*, London 1969, pp. 44-7, which includes a socially acute survey of Scotland prior to the Reformation.

in the course of the century. While glass-paned country mansions were the new feature of Tudor landscape to the South, massively fortified castles continued to be constructed in the Border country and the Lowlands. Private armed feuds remained rife throughout the kingdom. It was not until the assumption of power by James VI himself, from 1587 onwards, that the Scottish monarchy seriously improved its position. James VI, employing a mixture of conciliation and coercion, developed a strong Privy Council, patronized and played off the great magnates against each other, created new peerages, gradually introduced bishops into the Church, increased the representation of smaller barons and burghs in the local Parliament, subordinated the latter by the creation of a closed steering committee (the 'Lords of Articles'), and pacified the border.<sup>33</sup> By the turn of the 17th century, Scotland was apparently a recomposed land. Its socio-political structure nevertheless remained in notable contrast to that of contemporary England. Population was thin – some 750,000; towns very few and small, ridden by pastors. The largest noble houses comprised territorial potentates of a type unknown in England – Hamilton, Huntly, Argyll, Angus – controlling huge areas of the country, with full regalian powers, military retinues, and dependent tenancies. Seigniorial lordships were widespread among the lesser baronage; justices of the peace cautiously sent out by the king had been nullified. The numerous class of small lairds was habituated to petty armed disputes. The depressed peasantry, released from serfdom in the 14th century, had never staged a major rebellion. Economically poor and culturally isolated, Scottish society was still heavily mediaeval in character; the Scottish State was little more secure than the English monarchy after Bosworth.

The Stuart dynasty, transplanted to England, nevertheless pursued the ideals of Absolutist royalty that were now the standard norms of courts all over Western Europe. James I, inured to a country where territorial magnates were a law to themselves and parliament was of little account, now found a realm where grandee militarism had been broken and failed to see that parliament, on the other hand, represented the central locus of noble power. The much more developed character of English society thus for a time made it appear delusively easier for him

33. G. Donaldson, *Scotland: James V to James VII*, Edinburgh 1971, pp. 215–28, 284–90.

to rule. The Jacobean regime, contemptuous and uncomprehending of Parliament, made no attempt to assuage the growing oppositional temper of the English gentry. An extravagant court was combined with an immobilist foreign policy, based on rapprochement with Spain: both equally unpopular with the bulk of the landowning class. Divine Right doctrines of monarchy were matched by High Church ritualism in religion. Prerogative justice was used against common law, sale of monopolies and offices against parliamentary refusal of taxation. The unwelcome trend of royal government in England, however, did not encounter similar resistance in Scotland or Ireland, where the local aristocracies were coaxed with calculating patronage by the King, and Ulster was colonized by a mass plantation from the Lowlands to ensure Protestant ascendancy. But by the end of the reign, the political position of the Stuart monarchy was dangerously isolated in its central kingdom. For the underlying social structure of England was sliding away from beneath it, as it sought to pursue institutional goals that were nearly everywhere being successfully accomplished on the Continent.

In the century after the dissolution of the monasteries, while the population of England doubled, the size of the nobility and gentry had trebled, and their share of national wealth increased more than proportionately, with a particularly notable climb in the early 17th century, when rent-rises overtook price increases, benefiting the whole landowning class: the net income of the gentry perhaps quadrupled in the century after 1530.<sup>34</sup> The triadic system of landlord, farmer and agricultural labourer – future archetype of the English countryside – was already emergent in the richer parts of rural England. At the same time, an unprecedented concentration of trade and manufactures had occurred in London, some seven to eight times larger in the reign of Charles I than that of Henry VIII, making it the most dominant capital city of any country in Europe by the 1630's. By the end of the century, England would already form something like a single internal market.<sup>35</sup> Agrarian and mercantile capitalism had thus registered more rapid advances than in any other nation except the Netherlands, and major

34. L. Stone, *The Causes of The English Revolution 1529-1642*, London 1972, pp. 72-5, 131. This work, admirable in its economy and synthesis, is far the best conspectus of the epoch.

35. E. J. Hobsbawm, 'The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century', in Aston (ed.), *Crisis in Europe 1560-1660*, London 1965, pp. 47-9.

swathes of the English aristocracy itself – peerage and gentry – had successfully adapted to it. The political refortification of a feudal State thus no longer corresponded to the social character of much of the class on which it would inevitably have to rest. Nor was there a compelling social danger from below to tighten the links between the monarchy and the gentry. Because there was no need for a large permanent army, the tax-level in England had remained remarkably low: perhaps a third to a quarter of that in France in the early 17th century.<sup>36</sup> Little of this fell on the rural masses, while the parish poor received a prudential charity from public funds. The result was a relative social peace in the countryside, after the agrarian unrest in the mid 16th century. The peasantry, moreover, was not only subject to a much lighter tax burden than elsewhere, but was more internally differentiated. With the gathering commercial impetus in the countryside, this stratification in turn made possible and profitable a virtual abandonment of demesne cultivation for leasing of land by the aristocracy and gentry. The result was the consolidation of a relatively well-off kulak stratum (yeomanry) and a large number of rural wage-labourers, side by side with the general peasant mass. The situation in the villages was thus a reasonably secure one for the nobility, which did not have to fear rural insurrections any longer, and therefore had no stake in a strong central coercive machine at the disposal of the State. At the same time, the low tax-level which contributed to this agrarian calm checked the emergence of any large bureaucracy erected to man the fiscal system. Since the aristocracy had assumed local administrative functions since the Middle Ages, the monarchy was always deprived of any professional regional apparatus. The Stuart drive for a developed Absolutism was thus very handicapped from the start.

In 1625, Charles I conscientiously, if in general ineptly, took up the work of constructing a more advanced Absolutism with the unpromising materials available. The variant auras of successive court administrations did not help the monarchy: the peculiar combination of Jacobean corruption and Caroline censoriousness – from Buckingham

36. Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution*, London 1961, p. 51. In 1628, Louis XIII derived revenues from Normandy equal to Charles I's total fiscal income from all England: L. Stone, in 'Discussion of Trevor-Roper's General Crisis', *Past and Present*, No. 18, November 1960, p. 32.

to Laud – proved especially jarring to many of the gentry.<sup>37</sup> The vagaries of its foreign policy also weakened it at the outset of the reign: English failure to intervene in the Thirty Years' War was compounded by an unnecessary and unsuccessful war with France, the confused inspiration of Buckingham. Once this episode was terminated, however, the general direction of dynastic policy became relatively coherent. Parliament, which had vigorously denounced the conduct of the war and the minister responsible for it, was dissolved indefinitely. In the succeeding decade of 'personal rule', the monarchy tended to draw closer to the higher nobility once again, reinvigorating the formal hierarchy of birth and rank within the aristocracy by conferring privileges on the peerage, now that the risk of magnate militarism in England was past. In the cities, monopolies and benefits were reserved for the topmost stratum of urban merchants, who formed the traditional municipal patriciates. The bulk of the gentry and the newer mercantile interests were excluded from the royal concert. The same preoccupations were evident in the episcopal reorganization of the Church effected under Charles I, which restored the discipline and morale of the clergy, at the cost of widening the religious distance between local ministers and squires. The successes of Stuart Absolutism, however, were largely confined to the ideological/clerical apparatus of the State, which under both James I and Charles I began to inculcate divine right and hieratic ritual. But the economic/bureaucratic apparatus remained subject to acute fiscal cramp. Parliament controlled the right to taxation proper, and from the earliest years of James I resisted every effort to bypass it. In Scotland, the dynasty could increase taxes virtually at will, especially on the towns, since there was no strong tradition of bargaining over grants in the Estates. In Ireland, Strafford's draconian administration reclaimed lands and

37. These aspects of Stuart rule provided much of the colour, but not the lines, of the growing political conflict of the early 17th century. They are evoked with great bravura by Trevor-Roper, in his powerful discussion of these years: *Historical Essays*, London 1952, pp. 130–45. It is a mistake, however, to think that the problems of the Stuart monarchy were ever soluble merely by greater political adroitness and competence, as he suggests. In practice, probably no Stuart error was as fateful as the improvident sale of lands by their Tudor predecessors. It was not the lack of signal personal abilities, but of institutional foundations, that prevented the consolidation of English Absolutism.



revenues from the carpetbagger gentry who had moved in after the Elizabethan conquest, and made the island for the first time a profitable source of income for the State.<sup>38</sup> But in England itself, where the central problem lay, no such remedies were feasible. Hampered by earlier Tudor profligacy with royal estates, Charles I resorted to every possible feudal and neo-feudal device in the quest for tax-revenues capable of sustaining an enlarged State machine beyond Parliamentary control: revival of wardship, fines for knighthood, use of purveyance, multiplication of monopolies, inflation of honours. It was in these years, especially, that sale of offices for the first time became a major source of royal income – 30–40 per cent – and simultaneously remuneration of office-holders a major share of State expenditure.<sup>39</sup> All these devices proved inadequate: their profusion only antagonized the landowning class, much of it gripped by Puritan aversion to the new court and church alike. Significantly, Charles I's final bid to create a serious fiscal base was an attempt to extend the one traditional defense tax which existed in England: the payment of ship money by ports for the maintenance of the Navy. Within a few years, it was sabotaged by the refusal of unpaid local JPs to operate it.

The selection of this scheme, and its fate, revealed *en creux* the elements which were missing for an English version of Versailles. Continental Absolutism was built on its armies. By a strange irony, insular Absolutism could only exist on its meagre revenues so long as it did not have to raise any army. For Parliament alone could provide the resources for one, and once summoned was soon certain to start dismantling Stuart authority. Yet for the same historical reasons, the rising political revolt against the monarchy in England possessed no ready instruments for an armed insurrection against it; gentry opposition even lacked any focus for a constitutional assault on the personal rule of the king, so long as there was no convocation of Parliament. The deadlock between the two antagonists was broken in Scotland. In 1638, Caroline clericalism, which had already threatened the Scots nobility with resumption of secularized church lands and tithes, finally

38. The significance of Strafford's regime in Dublin, and the reaction it provoked in the New English landlord class, are discussed in T. Ranger, 'Strafford in Ireland: a Revaluation', in Aston (ed.), *Crisis in Europe 1560–1660*, pp. 271–93.

39. G. Aylmer, *The King's Servants. The Civil Service of Charles I*, London 1961, p. 248.

provoked a religious upheaval by the imposition of an Anglicanized liturgy. The Scottish Estates united to reject this: and their Covenant against it acquired immediate material force. For in Scotland, the aristocracy and gentry were not demilitarized: the more archaic social structure of the original Stuart realm preserved the warlike bonds of a late mediaeval polity. The Covenant was able to field a formidable army to confront Charles I within a few months. Magnates and lairds rallied their tenantry in arms, burghs provided funds for the cause, mercenary veterans of the Thirty Years' War supplied professional officers. The command of an army backed by the peerage was entrusted to a general returned from Swedish service.<sup>40</sup> No comparable force could be raised by the monarchy in England. There was thus an underlying logic in the fact that it was the Scottish invasion of 1640 which finally put an end to Charles I's personal rule. English Absolutism paid the penalty for its lack of armour. Its deviation from the rules of the late feudal State only provided a negative confirmation of their necessity. Parliament, convoked *in extremis* by the king to deal with military defeat by the Scots, proceeded to erase every gain registered by the Stuart monarchy, proclaiming a return to a more pristine constitutional framework. A year later, Catholic rebellion erupted in Ireland.<sup>41</sup> The second weak link in the Stuart peace had snapped. The struggle to seize control over the English army that now had to be raised to suppress the Irish insurrection, drove Parliament and King into the Civil War. English Absolutism was brought to crisis by aristocratic particularism and clannic desperation on its periphery: forces that lay historically behind it. But it was felled at the centre by a commercialized gentry, a capitalist city, a commoner artisanate and yeomanry: forces pushing beyond it. Before it could reach the age of maturity, English Absolutism was cut off by a bourgeois revolution.

40. The colonels of the army were nobles, the captains were lairds, the rank-and-file were 'stout young ploughmen' serving as their tenants: Donaldson, *Scotland: James V to James VII*, pp. 100-2. Alexander Leslie, Commander of the Army of the Covenant, was a former Vasa governor of Stralsund and Frankfurt-on-Oder: with him and his colleagues, the European experience of the Thirty Years' War came home to Britain.

41. It is possible, although not certain, that Charles I may have unwittingly triggered the Old Irish rising in Ulster by his clandestine negotiations with Old English notables in Ireland in 1641: see A. Clarke, *The Old English in Ireland*, London 1966, pp. 227-9.