4.2: The Glorious Revolution and the English Empire

During the brief rule of King James II, many in England feared the imposition of a Catholic absolute monarchy by the man who modeled his rule on that of his French Catholic cousin, Louis XIV. Opposition to James II, spearheaded by the English Whig party, overthrew the king in the Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689. This paved the way for the Protestant reign of William of Orange and his wife Mary (James’s Protestant daughter).

JAMES II AND THE GLORIOUS REVOLUTION

King James II (Figure 4.2.1), the second son of Charles I, ascended the English throne in 1685 on the death of his brother, Charles II. James then worked to model his rule on the reign of the French Catholic King Louis XIV, his cousin. This meant centralizing English political strength around the throne, giving the monarchy absolute power. Also like Louis XIV, James II practiced a strict and intolerant form of Roman Catholicism after he converted from Protestantism in the late 1660s. He had a Catholic wife, and when they had a son, the potential for a Catholic heir to the English throne became a threat to English Protestants. James also worked to modernize the English army and navy. The fact that the king kept a standing army in times of peace greatly alarmed the English, who believed that such a force would be used to crush their liberty. As James’s strength grew, his opponents feared their king would turn England into a Catholic monarchy with absolute power over her people.
In 1686, James II applied his concept of a centralized state to the colonies by creating an enormous colony called the Dominion of New England. The Dominion included all the New England colonies (Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Plymouth, Connecticut, New Haven, and Rhode Island) and in 1688 was enlarged by the addition of New York and New Jersey. James placed in charge Sir Edmund Andros, a former colonial governor of New York. Loyal to James II and his family, Andros had little sympathy for New Englanders. His regime caused great uneasiness among New England Puritans when it called into question the many land titles that did not acknowledge the king and imposed fees for their reconfirmation. Andros also committed himself to enforcing the Navigation Acts, a move that threatened to disrupt the region’s trade, which was based largely on smuggling.

In England, opponents of James II’s efforts to create a centralized Catholic state were known as Whigs. The Whigs worked to depose James, and in late 1688 they succeeded, an event they celebrated as the Glorious Revolution while James fled to the court of Louis XIV in France. William III (William of Orange) and his wife Mary II ascended the throne in 1689.

The Glorious Revolution spilled over into the colonies. In 1689, Bostonians overthrew the government of the Dominion of New England and jailed Sir Edmund Andros as well as other leaders of the regime (Figure 4.2.2). The removal of Andros from power illustrates New England’s animosity toward the English overlord who had, during his tenure, established Church of England worship in Puritan Boston and vigorously enforced the Navigation Acts, to the chagrin of those in port towns. In New York, the same year that Andros fell from power, Jacob Leisler led a group of Protestant New Yorkers against the dominion government. Acting on his own authority, Leisler assumed the role of King William’s governor and organized intercolonial military action independent of British authority. Leisler’s actions usurped the crown’s prerogative and, as a result, he was tried for treason and executed. In 1691, England restored control over the Province of New York.
Figure 4.2.2: This broadside, signed by several citizens, demands the surrender of Sir Edmund (spelled here “Edmond”) Andros, James II’s hand-picked leader of the Dominion of New England.

The Glorious Revolution provided a shared experience for those who lived through the tumult of 1688 and 1689. Subsequent generations kept the memory of the Glorious Revolution alive as a heroic defense of English liberty against a would-be tyrant.

ENGLISH LIBERTY

The Glorious Revolution led to the establishment of an English nation that limited the power of the king and provided protections for English subjects. In October 1689, the same year that William and Mary took the throne, the 1689 Bill of Rights established a constitutional monarchy. It stipulated Parliament’s independence from the monarchy and protected certain of Parliament’s rights, such as the right to freedom of speech, the right to regular elections, and the right to petition the king. The 1689 Bill of Rights also guaranteed certain rights to all English subjects, including trial by jury and habeas corpus (the requirement that authorities bring an imprisoned person before a court to demonstrate the cause of the imprisonment).

John Locke (1632–1704), a doctor and educator who had lived in exile in Holland during the reign of James II and returned to England after the Glorious Revolution, published his Two Treatises of Government in 1690. In it, he argued that government was a form of contract between the leaders and the people, and that representative government existed to protect “life, liberty and property.” Locke rejected the divine right of kings and instead advocated for the central role of Parliament with a limited monarchy. Locke’s political philosophy had an enormous impact on future generations.
of colonists and established the paramount importance of representation in government.

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Visit the Digital Locke Project to read more of John Locke’s writings. This digital collection contains over thirty of his philosophical texts.

The Glorious Revolution also led to the English Toleration Act of 1689, a law passed by Parliament that allowed for greater religious diversity in the Empire. This act granted religious tolerance to nonconformist Trinitarian Protestants (those who believed in the Holy Trinity of God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost), such as Baptists (those who advocated adult baptism) and Congregationalists (those who followed the Puritans’ lead in creating independent churches). While the Church of England remained the official state religious establishment, the Toleration Act gave much greater religious freedom to nonconformists. However, this tolerance did not extend to Catholics, who were routinely excluded from political power. The 1689 Toleration Act extended to the British colonies, where several colonies—Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Delaware, and New Jersey—refused to allow the creation of an established colonial church, a major step toward greater religious diversity.

Section Summary

The threat of a Catholic absolute monarchy prompted not only the overthrow of James II but also the adoption of laws and policies that changed English government. The Glorious Revolution restored a Protestant monarchy and at the same time limited its power by means of the 1689 Bill of Rights. Those who lived through the events preserved the memory of the Glorious Revolution and the defense of liberty that it represented. Meanwhile, thinkers such as John Locke provided new models and inspirations for the evolving concept of government.

Review Questions

Which of the following represents a concern that those in England and her colonies maintained about James II?

that he would promote the spread of Protestantism

that he would reduce the size of the British army and navy, leaving England and her colonies vulnerable to attack

that he would advocate for Parliament’s independence from the monarchy

that he would institute a Catholic absolute monarchy
D

What was the Dominion of New England?

James II’s overthrow of the New England colonial governments
the consolidated New England colony James II created
Governor Edmund Andros’s colonial government in New York
the excise taxes New England colonists had to pay to James II

B

What was the outcome of the Glorious Revolution?

James II was overthrown, and William III and Mary II took his place. The 1689 Bill of Rights limited the future power of the monarchy and outlined the rights of Parliament and Englishmen. In Massachusetts, Bostonians overthrew royal governor Edmund Andros.

Glossary

**Dominion of New England**
James II’s consolidated New England colony, made up of all the colonies from New Haven to Massachusetts and later New York and New Jersey

**Glorious Revolution**
the overthrow of James II in 1688

**nonconformists**
Protestants who did not conform to the doctrines or practices of the Church of England