

## The Long Parliament of Charles II

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Alan Marshall

Do we get the history of parliament we actually deserve or the one we want to see? From the broad Whiggish vistas of the 19th century to the Namierite views of the 20th century, to the post-revisionist views of the 21st, more than most history the sources and narratives on this remarkable institution of parliament were always significant and seem to reflect the history we wish to see. Yet there are problems with our sources. In the later 17th century parliament's story was a narrative that often emerged in spite of, rather than because of, the institution it was describing. It is this fact that drives Annabel Patterson's examination the Long Parliament of Charles II.

Here, she notes, was a parliament that ran from 1661–1679, yet it is neglected. Moreover it is a parliament whose sources can give us some insight into how parliamentary history came to be written. Professor Patterson does not claim to be 'a parliamentary historian nor a historian proper' (p. 4). Perhaps not being the former is no bad thing, for in this book she takes a refreshing literary eye to examining the sources on Parliament in the reign of Charles II and this 'vision', through its use of many diverse sources and their genres enables her to explore how we got much of that parliamentary history we have today; it also points the way for some future research.

The work, which is as much an exercise in historiography as a straight-forward history of this particular parliament, takes a close look at the 'Long Parliament' and its 18 sessions. It was a body that was frequently prorogued and adjourned, until it finally it collapsed amidst the Popish Plot crisis. In relaying this history the book at times seems in parts to border on a conventional history of the parliament, although such an approach is still very valuable and it itself this can enable the book to act as a very good reference guide, given all of its detail and its chronology of the parliament's doings. In other ways, however, Professor

Patterson has taken a more unconventional approach to the usual parliamentary history and the work is just as much, if not more, of a detailed dissection of the sources from which we know the story of the parliament. It is also a very good example of how literary skills, handled well, can help us understand the making of the history of such a body.

The book is divided into four parts: methods and scope, perspectives, sessions, and the 18th century. In the first of these sections we get a fine examination of the miscellaneous sources that recorded this parliament's activities; in the second chapter there is a comprehensive chronology of its activities. In part two the book really begins to take off with a very intriguing analysis of the King's speeches to this body and a detailed examination of the memoirists who wrote on it, as well as an examination of the 'scofflaw' pamphlets, which related a section of parliamentary proceedings to the public eye. It is this, and part four, on the 18th century historians who wrote of the parliament, particularly Anchitell Grey, with the 'playing off of different voices' that are undoubtedly the most valuable parts of the work. They have lots of intriguing pointers for future research. Part three is a detailed narrative of the sessions of the parliament.

Now, this particular parliament has been done before, in 1966 by D. T. Witcombe and in 1989 by Paul Seaward; it has also appeared in other works on the Restoration period and it's an important period of parliamentary history that raises a lot of interesting questions.<sup>(1)</sup> Why did Charles II, usually reckoned as one of the shrewdest of the early modern English Kings keep his first real parliament in being for so long (nearly 18 years) and what was it that drove him to use adjournments, prorogation and delay as tactics to maintain his control over the body? Were the Parliament and more specifically the Commons really shackled by the crown throughout this period? Some of these questions are answered here.

There is little doubt, however, that in our interpretation of the reign we need periodically to return to such events as this parliament to see them anew, to take a different angle or a different perspective. To use what Kevin Sharpe has called our cultural vision to see 'a product of history and change, and in turn what we see reshapes history'.<sup>(2)</sup> And as he goes on to note, conventional views have often led to 'more heat than light and ultimately left the subject still in the dark'.<sup>(3)</sup> So a fresh eye is always to be welcomed.

Yet the Stuart government in the later 17th century rested upon a number of constitutional pillars re-established at the Restoration in 1660, not just parliament. They all came under some strain throughout the period, especially in 1688, and in the 1690s, but essentially survived in the same form well into the 18th century. Post-Restoration we can begin to observe these strains at work in the traditional Eltonian 'points of contact': court, Privy Council and parliament. And from our 18th-century sources we can see how their authors used the era.

It might be said that the struggle over parliament's role in government was to change everything, not the least the way we see the history of the period. Yet if the form of government post-1660 was supposedly a return to the constitutional norm, why was 1688 to end as legal or limited monarchy resting on a constitution, the central core of which was still a monarchical authority, but now curbed by a 'superstructure' of [newly won] limitations on that authority'.<sup>(4)</sup> This fact and the emergence of party politics in the early 1680s undoubtedly shaped the pattern of later Stuart government, so that by 1702 the constitution rested upon a 'firm basis of law' and while still at the centre of politics the monarchy was unable to detach itself from the Whig and Tory political parties operating in a revised system who in turn tried to appropriate the crown's authority for themselves. In the 1690s the presence of parliament and ever more frequent elections were battlefields for seizing the levers of the machinery of the state and for settling local disputes, or promoting personal ambitions. How different was the 1660s to all of this and can we find its history in the Long Parliament of the period?

Part of the problem of parliament has always been its narrative and to deal with this Professor Patterson effectively seeks to make the sources themselves the main part of her story. This is where the book is at its most valuable. The focus on how parliament and its doings were perceived at this time and how much was made public of their debates really is 'how we got parliamentary history'. So, by examining the sources, we are, she claims, listening to some of the most contemporary 'voices'; voices of those who observed this

institution at work, then broke the rules to tell us about it, and left it to a gaggle of 18th-century Whig authors, who perhaps are a louder voice than most, to re-create its image. Are the actual debates they described however the real essence of any parliament?

An interesting contrast with this work is the essay by C. R. Kyle and J. Peacey.<sup>(5)</sup> Their early modern parliament is not just an 'institutional event' and not just a ritual one either, nor is just debates for it is not an isolated institution, however much MPs may have wished it to be. Indeed more often than not it seems to be a crowded market place of noise, debate and access. With multitudes of people hanging round Westminster Hall and the lobbies eager to hear what they could of the speeches, to petition, to lobby, and to catch glimpse of the '*arcana sacra*' that went on in the chambers of Commons and Lords. It was not just debates then that made a parliament. That there was secrecy was natural, but they also suggest that the 'rules regarding secrecy existed in order that they could be enforced when necessary, not that they were imposed as a general rule'.<sup>(6)</sup> If parliament was a little bit more out in the public space than Professor Patterson suggests it does not lessen the route she has undertaken to understand its history. Also the book is generally limited to understanding the history of the commons in this parliament and in this it has a traditional focus. Having said this Professor Patterson admits that her work should perhaps be read in conjunction with Andrew Swatland's *The House of Lords in the Reign of Charles II* <sup>(7)</sup> for the full picture of this era.

Arguably the most important analysis given here is of the King's speeches and what she labels his psycho-strategical attitude to parliament. Those who are interested in Charles II would be well advised to read this section closely. The fact is that Charles II wasn't generally seen at his best on such occasions. The speeches therefore are important because of this and 'every word was taken as weightbearing' and could set the trend for the session (p. 63). Although mainly requests for money, and exculpation, they were also promptly printed. So we also see the royal face, not for the first time, trying to dominate the public space. Patterson analyses the characteristics of the speeches and it seems by these Charles was also engaging in an early attempt to manage the debates. He didn't often succeed. Thus she rightly claims the royal speech as a form of parliamentary history.

However, how much of this is really the king's voice? Did someone write his speeches for him and then he was left to read them out? Certainly Charles' use of rhetoric and the tone of the speeches, which the author is good at capturing, seems to suggest that the king did write quite a lot of this material himself; they were even pointedly satirised later on. His penchant for lying in them seems to dismay her, although in other cases Charles II was never a monarch noted for his truthfulness. Again it also seems that Charles' alleged charm and wit, used so effectively at his court for example, and his 'common touch' was lost on these occasions. Although some of the statements by the King before his Lord and Commons must have been said with his typical cynical view and indeed can be read with a wry smile by any historian who knows him in other contexts. Here, for example, is Charles II on his Long Parliament in 1664: 'I need not tell you how much I love Parliaments. Never a King was so much beholding to Parliaments as I have been; nor do I think the Crown can ever be happy without frequent Parliaments' (p. 49). Her close reading of the Kings' speeches in chapter three however is a very valuable exercise. It is a pity it stops in 1667, as it is a very good example of what such sensible close reading of such texts can reveal about the monarch's ideas and his audience.

Nor is the public space neglected in the work, for the manuscript newsletters of the day, the Gazette, correspondence, diaries and something on the motives of the recorders are all given their due. Certainly the imaginative use of the idea of genre is intriguing for the number of forms is 'a demanding exercise in our ability to hear tone' (p. 37).

The 'scofflaw pamphlets', the subject of another chapter, emerged at times of crisis and the work looks at five crises of this period. These 'illegal' pamphlets give us bits of parliamentary narrative that were later woven into its history in a number of forms. The chapter analyses them in some detail and then ends with a discussion on Marvell's 'An Account of the Growth of Popery', seen, in many senses, as a collage of disparate materials including yet more parliamentary debate and narrative. The united publication of the pamphlets in 1689 sees yet another type of genre emerge, which read 'seriatim' is yet another view of how we came to have the parliamentary history, as much as that history itself .

Lastly, part four examines the 18th-century sources and their image of the parliament in spite of the parliament. This takes us into a history of Grey's debates and the creation of the new genre of parliamentary history. That this was done primarily for political reasons in the 18th century is clear. There was a market for Restoration history at that time. 18th-century current issues then drove the creation of such history. There is no real surprise here if we remember Blair Worden's dissection of memoirs such as that of Edmund Ludlow or the works of Algernon Sidney and how they were altered to suit current sensibilities. Yet this discussion is, like the book itself, a very a useful excursus on these matters and recommended reading for any one interested in the history of the period and how parliamentary history came about.

The author is delighted with this review and does not wish to comment further. On the issue of parliamentary confidentiality, however, she acknowledges there is probably more to say, and is currently investigating the issue of the publication of parliamentary speeches in the 1640s. It is great to be in communication with proper historians!

## Notes

1. D.T. Witcombe, *Charles II and the Cavalier House of Commons, 1663-1674* (Manchester, 1966); P. Seaward, *The Cavalier Parliament and the Reconstruction of the Old Regime, 1661-1667* ( Cambridge , 1989).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. K. Sharpe, *Remapping Early Modern England: the Clture of Seventeenth-Century Politics* (Cambridge 2000),p.269.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ibid., p.270.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. G. Holmes, *British Politics in the Age of Anne* (Revised edition, London, 1987), p.186.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See C.R. Kyle and J. Peacey, ' 'Under Cover of so much coming and going': Public Access to Parliament and the Political process in Early Modern England', in C.R.Kyle and J. Peacey, eds, *Parliament at work Parliamentary committees, Political Power and Public Access in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, 2002).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Ibid, p.16.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Andrew Swatland, *The House of Lords in the Reign of Charles II* (Cambridge, 1996).[Back to \(7\)](#)

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