Though every period of English history might be called an era of change, the seventeenth century especially deserves this designation. England was in transition, at times convulsive, from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy and from a tyrannical to a tolerant church. In politics and religion the theory of rule by divine right, with its requirement of passive obedience, was giving way to the concept of rule by consent of the governed. What emerged from the political and religious settlement of 1688 was in governmental respects the England of today.

POLITICAL EVENTS

With the death of the queen, England entered on troubled times. The delicate balance of church and state preserved by Elizabeth for forty-five years required a political intelligence that her immediate Stuart successors did not have. James I (1603-25) had her shrewdness without her sensitivity to popular feeling. Charles I (1625-49) had neither. With the accession of James, the balance began to tilt in a Catholic direction. James had bad memories of Presbyterian interference with his reign as James VI of Scotland when he was a youth ruling under regents. He allied England with Spain by treaty and with France by marriage (of his son Charles to the sister of Louis XIII) and committed England to neutrality in the Protestant-Catholic struggle in Europe.

This official neutrality seemed to the largely Protestant populace to conceal a bias in favor of Catholic political interests. Their suspicion was not diminished when James executed their hero, Sir Walter Raleigh, to appease Spain, a nation still trying to force Catholicism on Holland. The near success of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605 convinced Protestants of the seriousness of the Catholic threat. Thirteen Catholic conspirators planned to blow up the Parliament building while Parliament, with the king in attendance, was in session.

The king’s apparent Catholic bias was, however, more political than religious. James was a royal absolutist, bent on the total unification of his realm. He relished the dual authority of an English monarch as head of the civil government and the church—an authority he had not been granted as king of Scotland. Accordingly, he vigorously suppressed both political and religious nonconformity, which he regarded as one and the same. Of the kinds of religious nonconformity current in England, Puritanism seemed to him more politically troublesome than Catholicism. Of the Puritans he declared, “I shall make them conform themselves or I will harry them out of the land, or else do worse.”

Some did leave the land. Religious emigrations to New England began in 1620 with the founding of the Separatist settlement at Plymouth. They climaxed in 1630 with the forming of the Puritan colony of Massachusetts Bay, centered in Boston. Other refugees found a haven closer to home. The counties of Ulster in northern Ireland, settled earlier by English and Scottish emigrants, provided a degree of religious freedom. Those dissenters who chose not to leave England waited anxiously under darkening skies of civil unrest.
The storm broke during the reign of James's son Charles. Inheriting a bad situation, he only made it worse. Charles antagonized Parliament by ignoring its will in foreign policy, exacting forced loans, increasing taxes on imports and property, and discouraging dissent, both political and religious. To discourage dissent, he assumed the right to arrest, try, and punish subjects without normal judicial procedures and used the royal courts to enforce his repressive measures.

Charles also set out to Catholicize Anglican worship. For this purpose, he found a willing servant in the haughty, tenacious William Laud, archbishop of Canterbury. Laud, working closely with the royal courts, undertook a thorough reform of the church, searching out and correcting all deviation from "High Church" dress and ritual. He even went so far as to encourage activities specifically obnoxious to Puritans, such as May dancing and Sabbath breaking.

Laud overstepped prudent limits when he tried to force on Presbyterian Scotland a liturgy modeled on The Book of Common Prayer. His effort caused a riot in Edinburgh and stirred the Scots to arms. The English troops sent to quell the uprising drew back, finding themselves outmatched, and the Scottish army invaded northern England. The English Parliament, sympathetic with the Scots, refused to vote funds to finance a military campaign without getting satisfaction of their grievances from Charles and, in any case, intended to make peace with the Scots. Charles, realizing that the demands of the Scots and of Parliament were nonnegotiable and impossible to grant without yielding up his accustomed powers, left London and gathered troops in York to win back his kingdom. Thus began a civil war-between Puritan "Roundheads" and royalist "Cavaliers"-that would end six and a half years later with the execution of Charles and the formation of a government without a king.

From 1649 to 1660, England was ruled by a Council of State answerable to leaders of the revolutionary army. These years are known to historians as the Interregnum ("between reigns") or Commonwealth Period. The commander in chief of the army, Oliver Cromwell, was declared "Lord Protector" of the Commonwealth in 1653 and exercised despotic powers until his death in 1658. A Presbyterian General Assembly displaced the bishops, and all clergy loyal to the Anglican ecclesiastical order had to give up their positions.

A division arose between Presbyterians, dominant in Parliament, and Independents, prevalent in the army, concerning the authority of the national church over the local congregation. The Independents were largely Anglican congregationalists of Puritan persuasion who believed in and practiced the autonomy of the local church. They were no more friendly to rule by Presbyterian synod and assembly than to rule by bishops. A compromise permitted existing Independent congregations to continue to meet without interference.

But Cromwell was never able to reconcile the religious uniformity demanded by Parliament with the religious toleration required by the army. Consequently, like the Stuart kings, he had to rule without parliamentary support. Parliament itself was divided on the issue of church government.

Cromwell's sternness of rule maintained peace in the land, made England a great military power, but aroused much resentment among the people. The Protectorate, deeply in debt, held together only a year after the death of Cromwell in 1658;
for his son Richard showed little ability, and even less desire, to rule. As civil order deteriorated, representatives of Parliament, backed by the army, offered the crown of England to the royal heir, Charles, then residing in Holland. The return of the monarchy in 1660 is called the Restoration. The entire period from 1660 to 1700 is known to literary historians as the Restoration Period.

Charles II, unlike his father and grandfather, possessed great personal charm. James I, though intelligent, was cruelly mannered; Charles I was sickly, humorless, and dull. The new king knew how to please--his subjects generally, but himself especially. He was suave and accommodating in manner but devious and entirely self-regarding in his ways. Devoted to pleasure and loyal only to himself, Charles was a moral shell. His dissolute court scandalized even staunch royalists like Samuel Pepys, who was himself given to licentious living. Restoration London seemed to men of sober mind a veritable Vanity Fair of false values and corrupting influences.

Certain limitations of royal power conceded by the desperate Charles I at the end of his reign remained in effect: there could be no royal courts, no taxation without consent of Parliament, and no arbitrary arrests by king or Privy Council. But supported by a Parliament eager to restore the earlier status quo, Charles and his ministers carried out harsh measures against religious dissent. A series of acts known as the Clarendon Code excluded from office all who would not renounce the Solemn League and Covenant, still sacred to Presbyterians, and removed from the church all ministers who would not conduct their services according to a further Catholicized Book of Common Prayer. On August 22, 1662, more than a thousand dissenting clergy were put out of their parishes. The Code also set penalties for attendance at services other than those conforming to the Prayer Book. Charles II enacted even more repressive measures in Scotland, where dissident Presbyterians, known as Covenanters, underwent brutal persecution, unequaled since the reign of Mary Tudor.

Dissatisfaction with the king increased until he became as unpopular as his father had been. Through secret agreements between Charles and the French king, England became very nearly a satellite of France. In return for large grants of money, Charles pledged his support of the European diplomatic schemes of Louis XIV. By the terms of the Treaty of Dover in 1670, Charles made an alliance against the Dutch Protestants and secretly bound himself to declare his allegiance to Roman Catholicism as soon as possible in return for French troops and money. When the treaty became known, the king was in trouble with his subjects, who opposed France for reasons both political and religious and favored Holland. Charles was forced to dissolve Parliament twice, in 1678 and 1679, to maintain his royal prerogatives and to protect the succession of his brother James to the throne.

Furthermore, English prestige abroad had fallen. Dunkirk, won by Cromwell, had been sold back to France. The English fleet had been humiliated by the Dutch navy. Also, the nation was in debt to France. To many, the Great Plague of 1665 and the Great London Fire of the following year were signs of the displeasure of God. But, though indignation was high, Charles died a natural death in 1685--having received last rites from a Catholic priest.

In James II (1685-88), Catholicism and moral libertinism were less guarded and more defiant than in Charles II, his brother. James, the first avowed Catholic ruler
since Mary Tudor (1553-58), was arrogant, bigoted, and debauched. He illegally appointed Catholics to important military and civilian posts, and his Jesuit advisor was admitted into the Privy Council. Ambassadors from the Vatican were welcome at court. In England Catholics and Dissenters alike enjoyed a new religious toleration, but in Scotland, persecution of the Covenants reached its peak.

James's behavior outraged all England, even the royalists. His daughters, Mary (wife of Holland's ruler and Protestant hero, William of Orange) and Anne, both Protestants, disapproved of his character and rule. When in June of 1688 his wife gave birth to a son, fear of a Catholic dynasty spread. Three weeks later, leaders of Parliament invited Mary's husband, William, to secure the throne for his wife and ensure Protestantism for her subjects. When William and his troops arrived in November, James, lacking support, fled the country. On February 6, 1689, William and Mary were crowned joint rulers of England, for Mary would not accept a position above her husband's. The nation had completed a peaceful transition from Stuart absolutism and Catholicism to a Protestant limited monarchy similar to England's today.

This transition, known as the "Glorious" or "Bloodless" revolution, was generally acceptable to both major political factions. During the reign of Charles II, the question of the royal succession had divided Parliament into two parties. The republican upholders of the rights of Parliament, descendants of the Puritan revolutionaries, were called Whigs ("Scottish outlaws"). The supporters of royal prerogatives and episcopacy were dubbed Tories ("Irish robbers"). A Stuart monarch satisfied the royalist Tories. Protestant monarchs with reduced powers satisfied the republican Whigs.

Before receiving the crown, William III (1689-1702) and Mary II (1689-94) had to assent to a Declaration (later, Bill) of Rights designed to prevent future abuses of royal power. By its provisions the English monarch cannot suspend or dispense with the law of the land, maintain a peacetime army, or rule without frequent sessions of Parliament. He can neither be a Roman Catholic nor be married to one. The Toleration Act of 1689 removed most of the restrictions and penalties of the Clarendon Code. Dissenters, with the exception of Roman Catholics and disbelievers in the Trinity, were permitted their own ministers and places of worship. Though further limitations of royal powers and enlargements of private liberties were to come, the constitutional foundation for limited monarchy and liberty of conscience was laid at this time.

**SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS**

The selling of church and crown lands after the Reformation increased the number of country squires and the wealth represented in the House of Commons. Prosperous commoners acquired estates and coats of arms and formed a majority in the Lower House. During the reigns of Elizabeth and James I in particular, the House of Commons became larger and more influential.

Another development gave a further impetus to the rise of the middle class. In 1685 more than 250,000 French Protestants fled their homeland. These religious emigrants, including many skilled and industrious artisans, were welcomed in England, where they contributed to the economic and spiritual vitality of the middle class.
Since religious and political conflicts were closely intertwined in Stuart history up to 1688, the important ecclesiastical developments of the period have already been mentioned. We need now only to review and interpret the main trends.

The conflict between the Puritan (Low Church) and traditionalist (High Church) Anglicans did not originate in the reign of James I. Before his accession the differences were deep and were hotly debated. But those who believed the Reformation had not gone far enough and wished to "purify" the church further and those who felt it had gone far enough, or even too far, kept an uneasy truce, partly in consideration of the age of the queen. Puritans saw vestiges of Roman Catholicism in Anglican church government (episcopacy, or rule by bishops), ritual (the use of priestly dress and the administering of communion to worshipers kneeling at an altar), and doctrine (a mystical view of communion). They split on whether the ecclesiastical system should be reorganized along republican lines and governed by a general assembly (the Presbyterian view) or whether it should be abolished altogether and local congregations be permitted to govern themselves (the Congregationalist view). Other dissenting groups, including Baptists, rejected not only the Anglican system but also the Anglican service, both High and Low, and practiced other forms of worship.

These Puritans and Anglicans made common cause against the tyranny of king and bishop during the Puritan revolution but fell at odds when they found themselves in power. Their inability to combine into an effective political force, together with widespread resistance to theocratic rule, resulted in the restoration of the Stuart line in 1660. Their political viewpoint by no means disappeared, however. In 1688, militant Protestantism once again rose against monarchy, driving from the throne a fourth Stuart king and fixing the limits of royal power.

The continuing influence of militant Protestantism was due to the increasing power of the middle class. But it was also due to the tendency of the Stuart kings to promote Catholicism in a Protestant land. James I was no Catholic, but his wife, Anne of Denmark, became a convert to Romanism. In fact, all four Stuart kings had Catholic mothers and wives. After Elizabeth's death Romanists seemed confident of court sympathy, making safe their return. The number of priests in England probably doubled with the accession of James.

During the reign of Charles I, who patronized Catholic courtiers, conversions to Catholicism increased among High Anglican clergy and leading nobles. Meanwhile, Archbishop Laud steered the church in a Catholic direction. After 1660, royal friendliness to Catholicism became increasingly obvious, and the English feared a return of Catholic persecution. What aroused the Puritans and their successors, the Whigs, was indeed no idle threat. Their memories, assisted by Foxe, were long enough to remember the days of Mary I, and they were well aware that on the Continent the days of Catholic persecution had not ended.

Nonconformists outside the church could draw similar conclusions from firsthand experience. Having suffered during the reigns of James I and Charles I, they suffered far more under the later Stuarts. Among the Scottish Covenanters the
problem was not only the Catholic resemblance and drift of the English church but also the secular control of the church. They could not accept a secular head of their state church, formerly ruled by an assembly of clergy, especially when that head happened to be an immoral Catholic monarch.

It is true that they divided on the question of whether persecuted Christians may resist civil authorities with force. Some, in fact, gave a semblance of justification to their persecutors by armed rebellion and violent retaliation. But the Covenanters as a whole were peaceful, law-respecting subjects, ready to give political allegiance to the crown while withholding spiritual allegiance from any king but their Lord Christ. They deserve high recognition among the heroes of the Protestant faith.

The Anglican church during this period felt the inroads of unbelief as well as of false belief. As early as the reign of James I, rationalist theologians met frequently at the house of Lord Falkland, near Oxford, and formulated a position of religious latitude. Their position emphasized the beliefs that various Christian sects and even pagan religions profess in common. In reducing doctrinal essentials they broadened Christian identity well beyond the distinctives of historic Christianity. One could be known as a Christian and believe much less than before. A later group, the Cambridge Platonists, while seeking analogies between the teachings of Plato and Christ, furthered this latitudinarian movement in the reign of Charles II.

Rationalist theology led naturally into the deism of the eighteenth century. Though Catholic traditionalism and rationalism were strongly resisted by godly clergy within the church, they coexisted comfortably in High Anglican circles. Both left their marks on the English church of the following centuries.

A lasting achievement of Anglican and Scottish Presbyterians during this period was the Westminster Confession, the latest of the great historic creeds of the Christian church. Completed in 1647 by the Westminster Assembly of Divines, a conference summoned by Parliament in 1643 to remake the English church, the Confession was approved by the Scottish National Assembly in 1647 and by the English and Scottish Parliaments in 1648 and 1649 respectively. Though it only temporarily displaced the Thirty-nine Articles of Anglicanism, reinstated in 1660, it remained the official statement of faith of the Scottish church and continues to be so regarded by conservative Presbyterianism. While drawing up the Confession, the Westminster divines produced two catechisms: a longer, for mature saints, and a shorter, for less knowledgeable believers such as children. The Shorter Catechism, used widely among Protestants for the instruction of children, has been considered “the ripest product of Puritan experience and theological thought.”

CULTURE

Language

Spelling during the Elizabethan period was flexible, so much so that printers could use spelling as spacing to “justify” their lines (cause them to end evenly). As printers became more uniform in their spelling practice, a consensus developed about the correct spelling of common words. This consensus was strengthened by the appearance, during the reign of James I, of the first English dictionaries. books
giving definitions of "hard English words." They were consulted for spellings as well as for meanings and therefore contributed to the normalization of spelling. English spelling became fairly well standardized by 1650, although alternative spellings still appear in dictionaries today.

**Learning**

The seventeenth century in England was a vital era of scientific experimentation and discovery. It began with the publication of William Gilbert’s treatise on magnetism in 1600. The period from 1603 to 1688 included such notable achievements as William Harvey’s demonstration of the circulation of the blood (1628) and Robert Boyle’s formulation of Boyle’s Law (1662), which made possible the transition from alchemy to modern chemistry. The period climaxed with Isaac Newton’s explanation of gravitation, analysis of light, and invention of calculus (1664-66). These men were inspired by another Englishman, often called the father of modern science, Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626). His *Novum Organum*, published in 1620 as part of a larger work, recommends a "new instrument" for understanding the world. This instrument is scientific induction; drawing conclusions from direct observation of physical phenomena.

Most seventeenth-century men of science, unlike so many since, studied the physical universe with reverence for its Creator. They recognized God in nature as well as in the Scriptures. They studied "the book of God’s works" as supplementary but subservient to "the Book of God’s Word." Unfortunately their achievements give occasion to intellectual pride. Intended as blessings by the divine Source and Revealer of all knowledge, their discoveries were received as monuments of human genius. To an admiring world their success justified a faith in human reason rather than confirming belief in the wisdom and power of God.

**Literature**

John Bunyan’s giants Pope and Pagan loomed over the literature, as well as over the political and religious life, of the Stuart period. Fashionable poetry shows Catholicizing and classicizing tendencies in reaction against the Elizabethan style and themes. Whereas Tudor poets drew heavily from both medieval and classical traditions, their work remained fundamentally Protestant. Lyric poems of the next period, however, were likely to take on a Catholic or pagan tone. Until about 1660 the poetic ideal was either intellectual ingenuity or elegant simplicity or both. Some readers, such as Izaak Walton, still preferred the "old-fashioned poetry" to the poetry "now in fashion in this critical age."

But the new "metaphysical" and "Cavalier" modes, initiated by John Donne (1572-1631) and Ben Jonson (1572-1637) respectively, attracted the most gifted poets. Typical court poetry was either audacious displays of wit or hedonistic love lyrics. After 1660, poetry, like other forms of art, followed rational restraint; and the new ideal of concise, pungent, memorable expression favored the use of the heroic couplet.

Though court influences of the Stuart period were uncongenial to the kind of poetry Christians especially value, poets of the age, including the Protestant convert
John Donne and his poetic disciple George Herbert (1593-1633), produced some of the most spiritually fervent, richly artistic lyrics in English. The Puritan poet John Milton (1608-74) put into epic form the story of human redemption. While fulfilling its purpose to “justify the ways of God to men,” *Paradise Lost* (1667; rev. 1674) revitalized the main poetic tradition descending from Chaucer through Spenser.

This remarkable poetic achievement was equaled by the accomplishments of the age in prose. The formal artificiality of Bacon and Donne united with the personal directness of popular political rhetoric in Milton’s eloquent appeal for freedom of the press, *Areopagitica* (1644). The crowning achievement in nonfiction prose was the Authorized (King James) Version of the Scriptures (1611). The revisers went about their work with a concern for sound as well as sense, and the resulting translation conveys the original meaning with the utmost beauty and impact.

By 1660, the ideal in prose as well as poetry was changing to one of clarity, concision, and grace. The need of journalism and science for simple, straightforward expression and the influence of the Puritan plain style of preaching gave rise to a style of conversational directness. This style appears at its most elegant in the essays of John Dryden (1631-1700) and at its most colloquial in the equally effective prose of John Bunyan (1628-88). Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678; rev. 1679) is to prose fiction what Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is to poetry: the last great masterpiece of the Christian tradition in British literature.

Stuart literature generally reflects human struggle (either the outward political and religious conflict of the times or the inward trial of the soul) and the serene aftermath of such struggle. It has a highly personal, even idiosyncratic, quality. The personality of the writer is much more noticeable and his voice much more audible than before. Finally, in the prose of the period, artistic success is frequently a by-product of didactic purpose. Bunyan, bent on serving God and helping his reader reach the Celestial City, produced a masterpiece by accident. The success of his *Pilgrim’s Progress* reminds us that triumphs, spiritual and artistic, can occur in the most inhospitable environment—even in the cell of a Bedford jail.