

THE WHITE KING: CHARLES I, TRAITOR, MURDERER, MARTYR

(LEANDA DE LISLE)

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As with Nicholas II, the last ruling Romanov, how we view Charles I is largely set by how his days ended. And as with Nicholas, we have been further conditioned by generations of propaganda pumped out by the winners and their ideological allies, claiming that it was Charles's own bad philosophy, coupled with incompetence, rather than mostly bad luck and choices only wrong in retrospect, that led to his death. Leanda de Lisle's *The White King* rejects the fake news and offers an even-handed view.

Charles's appellation of "White King" is obscure and long forgotten. De Lisle resurrects it, in order to "inspire curiosity," for it is double-sided and shows the split of views about Charles. To some, he was a saintly martyr. White is the color of innocence, and also the color of the pall of snow that covered Charles's body as he was carried to his grave in February of 1649. Thus, it was an emotional term used by his supporters after his death. But during his life a "White King" was also the subject of an ancient prophecy of an evil king to come, and therefore his enemies also called him by that name, casting him as a malevolent presence, the "traitor" and "murderer" of the subtitle.

The history here is straightforward, and begins with a brief account of the reign of Charles's father, James I, who was also, and first, James VI of Scotland, and became King of England in 1603. James succeeded because Elizabeth I had no issue; he was the great-great-grandson of Henry VIII, and son of Mary, Queen of Scots, executed by Elizabeth in 1587. James died in 1625, generally regarded as not a bad king, who continued the middle way of the Church of England, rejecting Scots Presbyterianism and upholding episcopacy, but persecuting Catholics as Elizabeth had. He also oversaw the creation of the King James Bible, an example of his general focus on domestic concerns, avoiding foreign wars and, critically, not spending beyond his means. James lacked Elizabeth's gift for public relations, although he was popular enough, and he communicated to his son (and to all his children—despite being

rumored to be homosexual, he had eight children) a lofty view of the divine right of kings.

As with so many things from that earlier age, though, the divine right of kings is not understood today, being seen merely as, in de Lisle's terms, "ridiculous and perverse," and Charles's reputation is tangled up with the confused view we have of that political theory. It probably has more to recommend it than meets the eye, and in the English context never meant the complete supremacy of the king, rather that the authority he had was not derived from contract or consent. It meant a strong king, one who could stand above and control faction, using his power to benefit everyone, while Parliament also maintained considerable power; supremacy was "the king in Parliament." (As de Lisle notes, the English franchise was broad. "Every freeman with property valued at over £2 had the right to vote—as much as 40 per cent of the adult male population.") Moreover, the king was "bound to make a reckoning to God for [his] subjects' souls as well as their bodies," an ancient principle among monarchs in the Christian West—for example, it was a major element of Charlemagne's thought and actions. What is more, some elements of what we think of as divine right theory are purely fictional: for example, as de Lisle mentions, the idea that medieval English kings as children each had a whipping boy, a friend who was punished for the prince's transgressions because the king could not be struck due to his exalted status, is a complete myth. The king got spanked like everyone else. But, like so many myths about medieval times, from *prima nocte* to the origin of "rule of thumb," it's an ideologically useful myth, in this case for those opposed to monarchy on principle and wedded to contract theories of political sovereignty. In reality, Charles did not think of himself, divine right or no, as an autocrat. He recognized the critical role Parliament had in government; his objection was that Parliament was trying to hobble him to a degree that made him unable to fulfil his own critical role. Given the other complexities of the age, this made conflict inevitable.

Unlike his father, Charles quickly became involved in European conflict, raging since the beginning of the Thirty Years War in 1618. This was the original sin of his reign, since without war, the English crown didn't need Parliament to vote it money; it received enough money from its own lands and traditional fee sources of income. Much of Charles's

reign turned on ever-shifting alliances and deals with France and Spain, as well as, more distantly, various Central European states, all of whom were embroiled in their own wars, which had (but were not purely determined by) a religious element. (His elder sister Elizabeth married Frederick, Elector of the Palatine, a German territory; she was called the “Winter Queen” since the Protestant Frederick was kicked out of his lands by the Catholic Habsburgs after only a few months of actual rule.) From the perspective of England, these alliances turned largely on a combination of complicated religious alignments and other national priorities, such as trade and the balance of power.

Charles needed a suitable wife, and tried to but was unable to find an appropriate Spanish bride. That might not have been the best idea; the Spanish were on the wane, and anyhow demanded significant concessions to Catholicism. So quickly, in 1625 Charles turned to Spain’s enemy, France, and married Henrietta Maria, daughter of the assassinated French king Henri IV and Marie de’ Medici, the powerful mother of Louis XIII and sometime regent of France. As de Lisle is at pains to point out, for hundreds of years the Roman Catholic Henrietta Maria has been cast as a malevolent little simpleton. In de Lisle’s account, this is grossly unfair and merely more propaganda from the winners in the Civil War and their ideological descendants. She was little, true, but fierce and extremely competent, and a major asset to Charles. De Lisle, in fact, located a previously unknown cache of letters between the two, in the private archives of Belvoir Castle, and uses them to great effect to support her point, although I don’t know enough to have an opinion of my own. It didn’t help her popularity, however, that mostly England fought France and was allied with Spain, so between that and her religion, the queen was seen, even during her lifetime, by many as an alien and dangerous presence.

Royalists and Parliamentarians drifted to war, tossed about by a confusing brew of religious conflict, class conflict, ethnic conflict among the three kingdoms now under one ruler (England, Scotland, and Ireland), and much else. Even “Parliament” wasn’t really an entity for war purposes; many of those who served in the Commons as the war began joined up with Charles, and most of the Lords did as well. For a very long time, both in America and England, Parliament has been seen as the righteous party in the English Civil War, and Charles as a benighted

and sinister enemy of liberty (although the Irish think otherwise, due to their ill treatment by the Protestants, as shown by the modern song, by the Pogues, with the refrain “A curse upon you Oliver Cromwell / You who raped our motherland”). Again, this is history as written by the victors, through the prism of Enlightenment dogma, and ignores that much of Parliament, and most of England, was strongly opposed to a large portion of the actions taken in Parliament’s name during the war, and even more to the execution of Charles. And none of this can be comprehended without the backdrop of a complex set of Protestant groups (English Catholics as such played almost no role in the Civil War): Covenanters, Presbyterians, Arminians, and so forth, along with, as the war played out, increasingly radical sects such as the Levellers, Diggers, and Fifth Monarchy Men (the latter not mentioned by de Lisle, but they fascinate me), all in a giant kaleidoscope, collectively complicated matters in a way new in English history.

One especially interesting fact about the war is that it was conducted in parallel in the media. It was the first English war where propaganda in the form of pamphlets and rapidly churned out books made a major difference in public opinion. Some of this seems silly to us but was important at the time—for example, parliamentarians accused Prince Rupert of the Rhine, Charles’s nephew and an essential Royalist general, of keeping a poodle that was a satanic familiar; Charles’s supporters wrote parody responses, like a seventeenth-century version of the *Babylon Bee*. More seriously, both sides wrote lengthy justifications for their positions, including Charles’s last work, the *Eikon Basilike*, posthumously published, which sold like hotcakes, undermining Cromwell’s Protectorate and paving the way for the Restoration.

After several years of back-and-forth warfare, in which a greater percentage of Englishmen died than in World War I (although brutality was far less than in Continental wars), with Parliamentary progress made possible only by cooperating with invasions by the radical Scots Covenanters, and the rise of Oliver Cromwell, Charles was defeated. Even though he had lost, Charles’s execution was far from inevitable. English kings had more than once been murdered after defeat, but to execute a king after legal process was largely inconceivable. His death resulted from a combination of his obduracy and refusal to compromise, Scots and Puritan extremism, and much else. Certainly, the vast majority of

Englishmen were interested not in his death, but in his restoration, perhaps with strict limitations (many of which were proposed to be time-limited even by his opponents). But the tiny remnant left of Parliament, purged successively until only Puritan fanatics sat there, combined with the strength of will of Cromwell, meant that Charles was sentenced and executed. He died well, thus cementing his reputation and providing a rallying cry for future royalists. Even so, generations of historians have seen praise of Charles as a criticism of Parliamentary supremacy, and maintained a dim view of his reign.

What is there for us to learn? Charles's biggest strategic error, as with so many Christian men of power who base their actions on what God wants, not on what they want, because they fear judgment for going too far, was the inability to punish his enemies as they needed to be punished. He shared much of what the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* said of King Stephen (reigned 1135–1154), "He was a mild man, and gentle and good, and did no justice." In the same manner, he too often would not follow through; as Robert Tombs said in his *The English and Their History*, "He could be persuaded to plunge into reckless actions, but repeatedly drew back 'amazed' when things went wrong." Under Charles, political and religious executions were zero, and he knuckled under to Parliament killing one of his chief ministers, the Earl of Strafford, through a bill of attainder coerced by mob violence, a decision he bitterly regretted to the end of his life. (And one with resonance today; "MPs who had abstained from the attainder bill against Strafford were publicly named and shamed, with news-sheets and pamphlets driving the verbal assaults on them as 'enemies of their country.'") Like Nicholas II Romanov, Charles might have done better mowing down his enemies at the right moment; instead, like Nicholas, driven in part by fear for his family, he took half measures such as, in person, trying and failing to seize his major opponents, thereby being publicly humiliated, and then absented himself from London at the wrong moment, letting his enemies consolidate their power.

Another fact to learn, or reinforce, is that the role of women in medieval and Renaissance England was much different than what "feminist" propaganda claims. It is not that de Lisle shoehorns women into her discussion, and she certainly does not offer history through a distorting and infantilizing lens. Rather, women simply had far more power in

medieval and Renaissance Europe than we are often told. This was true at all levels of society and for centuries (during the Crusades, Muslims in the Holy Land were appalled at the power and liberties the women of the Franks had), but most visible in the upper classes (as with most historical matters). In fact, women get nearly as much print in this book as men, because they were nearly as relevant to the events at hand. One is Marie de' Medici, mother of three kings and critical support at times for Charles (although de Lisle probably has a more favorable view of her than most historians). Another is Henrietta Maria, intimately involved in moral and logistical support for the war. Plus, of course, the Winter Queen, key player in European wars and mother of Prince Rupert. Also important were many non-regal women, too, such as Lucy Hay, Countess of Carlisle (whom de Lisle does frequently insist on calling "Lucy Carlisle," even though that was not her family name, married or unmarried). Anyone who actually reads history realizes that the so-called patriarchy is a myth, although sadly this book, or any book about this era, probably gets a lot fewer readers than any given lying Twitter feed using the hashtags #toxicmasculinity and #smashthepatriarchy.

Finally, and turning aside from power politics, de Lisle points out a key different perspective of the time, and one that is better in some ways than what we have inherited from the radical Protestants with their atomized view of human responsibility. "The hierarchical society Charles imagined was underpinned by Christ's example of self-sacrifice. Everyone owed service, both to those above them (commoner to noble, noble to king, king to God) and to those beneath them, to whom they owed a duty of care. This included protecting the weak, and promoting the talented and the brave." This in contrast to a pure meritocracy, which suggests "that those who are not successful have less merit than those who excel." True, the less successful may in fact have less ability, or they may be ridden with vice, but they do not necessarily have less merit, and they have no less human dignity. But this is forgotten today, by many conservatives as well as by our ruling classes, which is a major cause of the division of our society into a preening, globalized ruling class dwelling in glittering palaces on the coasts, and those increasingly left behind. And that division is, of course, a major cause of the political turmoil today—turmoil that, in many ways, resembles the ferment of 1640s England. You may draw your own conclusions.