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## WILLIAMITE PROPAGANDA IN THE ANGLO-DUTCH REVOLUTION

**Abstract:** The primary aim of this essay is to provide a revision of the events of 1688-89 in England, which – for over three hundred years – have been known as the ‘Glorious Revolution’. I wish to argue that without the military intervention of William of Orange, Stadholder of the United Provinces, the Revolution would not have taken place, thus it would be more appropriate to refer to these events as the ‘Anglo-Dutch Revolution’. Williamite propaganda – which the paper describes in details – played a crucial part in the success of the Revolution, as well as in the shaping of the interpretation (the so-called Whig interpretation) of the events after 1689, which dominated historiography for almost three hundred years. There is special emphasis in the essay on the analysis of the most important instrument of William of Orange’s propaganda, the *Declaration of Reasons* (issued on 30 September 1688), which justified the invasion and explained the Prince’s intentions.<sup>1</sup>

**Key words:** English history, seventeenth century, political propaganda, Anglo-Dutch relations, revolution

On 5 November 1688, William of Orange, the Stadholder of the United Provinces, landed in the south of England with his large army, and forced James II (his uncle and father-in-law) into exile. A few months later William and his wife, Mary, were proclaimed king and queen of England.

These events have – for over three hundred years – been known as the *Glorious Revolution*. Both words of the term are misleading. The word *revolution* is

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to dedicate this article to the memory of my beloved younger brother, Béla Borus, who died on Mount Pilatus in Switzerland on 9 November 2014.

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problematic for two reasons. First, it was not the mass of the people who dethroned James II. There was no national uprising in 1688-89. Second, the settlement was not radical. The Convention preserved the constitution, and there was little new in the *Declaration of Rights* (enacted as the *Bill of Rights* in December 1689). The monarch still had the power to summon and dissolve Parliaments, to veto legislation, to appoint and dismiss ministers, and to declare war and make peace (Speck 1989:163; Troost 2005:212; Coward 1995:360-361). The Whig leaders intentionally restricted their demands, because they feared that a powerful attack on the prerogative would drive William into the arms of the Tories (Rose 1999:210). In England the events of 1688-89 were *glorious* in the sense that – except for the loss of about ten lives – there was no bloodshed. This, however, did not apply to Scotland and Ireland where thousands of people were killed. At the same time, it was clearly inglorious that foreign aid had to be sought to drive a tyrant from the throne of England.

The term *Glorious Revolution* was coined by a Whig radical, John Hampden, in 1689, and it was popularised by King William's friend, Bishop Gilbert Burnet, and nonconformist preachers (Schwoerer 1992:3; Troost 2005:212). William and his allies in England carried on an intensive propaganda campaign both before and after the Revolution. Their primary aim was to improve William's public image, and to explain his motives, purposes and policies. The interpretation this propaganda conveyed came to be generally accepted, and it dominated the historiography of the Revolution until the early 1970s.

The chief mode of explaining England's past in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was the so-called Whig interpretation. The Whig approach was present-minded and strongly nationalistic. It celebrated modern English constitutionalism by emphasizing those episodes of England's past in which freedom seemed to triumph over oppression. To the Whig historians, English history and progress were synonymous. They believed that liberal England – which was the best of all possible worlds – grew inevitably out of the whole course of English history. In their eyes the Glorious Revolution was an inevitable stage in the development towards liberal democratic institutions.

In fact, there was nothing inevitable or preordained about the Revolution. The Glorious Revolution was essentially William of Orange's revolution. Without William's military intervention it would not have taken place, thus, it is more appropriate to refer to it as the Anglo-Dutch Revolution. Of course, we should shed no tears for James II who had alienated much of the political nation with his policies. Whatever his ultimate intentions, to many people it seemed that he wanted to introduce a Catholic absolutism. It is also true that the results of the Revolution were positive. It laid the foundations of a stable political system, it achieved religious toleration for Protestant Nonconformists, it resulted in a financial revolution and a new executive, the press became free, judges were no longer dependent on the government, and England became a first-rate European

power. All this, however, should not conceal the fact that James II's removal from the throne was the result of a conspiracy.

The conspiracy started in December 1687 when news came that Mary Beatrice of Modena, King James' second and Catholic wife, was pregnant. The possibility that the child would be a son, and that it would survive could not be ruled out. Up to this time, all William had to do was wait until the elderly James II died. Then he would inherit the throne through his wife, Princess Mary (Speck 1987:454).<sup>2</sup> Now, however, there was a danger that James' son would displace Mary in the line of succession. William had to take action.

England was crucial to William for two important reasons. First, his position at home, in the United Provinces, was unstable. William was strongly opposed by the anti-Orangist party, which wanted no war, and insisted on a decentralised form of government. The Stadholder had difficulty in convincing the inward-looking commercial world that their safety lay in European-wide diplomacy and war (Williams 1980:457-458). The fact that William's wife was in line to inherit the English throne *provided the necessary extra weight to make it possible for him to survive within the United Provinces* (Prall 1972:167). At the same time, England was crucial to William as a potential ally in the struggle against France. A large European coalition was needed to counter Louis XIV's aggression. In one way or another William had to bring England into an alliance against France. This is what the national security of the United Provinces demanded.

Louis XIV's domestic and foreign policies were especially aggressive at this time. In 1681 French troops took Strasbourg, Lorraine and Casale (in Piedmont). In the year after that, Louis' dragoons occupied Orange, William's small principality close to Avignon. In 1684 Genoa was largely destroyed and Luxemburg was annexed. In 1685 Louis revoked the Edict of Nantes, forcing in this way some 200,000 French Protestants into exile, and strengthening fears of Catholicism in both England and the Netherlands. In 1687 the Sun King introduced aggressive anti-Dutch trade measures. During the 1680s Louis XIV also quarrelled with Pope Innocent XI over control of the French Church, the election of the Archbishop-Elector of Cologne and the rights of the French embassy in Rome.

Until the mid-1680s the French king's strongest enemy, the Holy Roman Emperor was unable to counter Louis' aggression because of his war against the Turks. After the capture of Buda (September 1686), the victory near Mohács (August 1687), and the capture of Belgrade (September 1688), however, Leopold I was on the verge of winning a decisive victory over the Turks. Louis XIV decided to occupy the Rhineland to encourage the Turks and to prevent the strengthening of Hapsburg power in the west. William of Orange realised that if the French

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<sup>2</sup> James was 56 years old in 1688. By 17<sup>th</sup>-century standards he was an old man. Charles II had died at the age of 55. William himself was 52 when he died. Mary II died of smallpox at the age of 32. Queen Anne was only 49 at the time of her death.

dominated the Rhineland they might prevent the Emperor from coming to the rescue of the Netherlands. The key to the situation was in England.

William had been a close observer of English affairs throughout James' reign. In early 1687 he sent his agents to England to establish contacts with the Parliamentary opposition. In December 1687, when James' queen announced that she was pregnant, William and his English allies became alarmed enough to begin to co-ordinate the network of contacts that had been established. In April 1688 William declared that if some prominent persons invited him, he would intervene. On 10 June the queen gave birth to a baby boy. Three weeks later seven English conspirators sent a letter to William in which they invited him to go to England with an army, and promised him considerable support.

Almost immediately after the birth of the Prince of Wales rumours began to circulate of a fraud. It was alleged that a baby had been smuggled into the queen's bedchamber in a warming pan as she pretended to give birth. This story might be easily discounted on considering the circumstances under which the queen gave birth to her son:

*Mary Beatrice's labour proceeded smoothly as the large room filled with women. Friends, ladies of the bedchamber and relatives, including the dowager Queen Catherine, widow of King Charles II, were all there to attend the birth. A number of men entered the royal bedroom as well, priests were accompanied by most of the Privy Council and the Lord Chancellor, the latter stationing themselves close to the foot of the bed, partially screened from Mary Beatrice and Mrs Wilkes [her midwife]. This crowd included a good balance of Protestants and Catholics and in all numbered more than sixty people (Holmes 2005:149).*

It was clearly in William's interest to believe the story of the baby in the warming pan, since *it provided him with an excuse to invade England in defence of the hereditary right of his wife* (Weil 1992:68). At first William failed to realise this, and in their letter of invitation the *immortal seven* criticised him for having congratulated James II on the birth of his son. *We must presume to inform your Highness – they wrote – that your compliment upon the birth of the child (which not one in a thousand here believes to be the Queen's) hath done you some injury.*<sup>3</sup> Eventually William and his allies not only exploited the existing rumours but also promoted them.

The most important instrument of William's propaganda was his *Declaration of Reasons*<sup>4</sup> issued on 30 September 1688. The document justified the invasion

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<sup>3</sup> The letter is to be found among the State Papers in the Public Record Office. Extracts from the document are reprinted in the *Appendices* of Prall, S. 1972. *The Bloodless Revolution*. New York: Anchor Books.

<sup>4</sup> The full title of the document was *The Declaration of His Highness William Henry, Prince of Orange, of the Reasons Inducing Him to Appear in Armes in the Kingdom of England for Preserving*

and explained the Prince's intentions. Avoiding a direct attack on James II himself, the *Declaration* blamed his *evil counsellors* for introducing arbitrary government and overturning the religion, laws and liberties of the people. The document enumerated the violations of these counsellors, placing special emphasis on the use of the dispensing power. It was stated – quite wrongly – that the dispensing power (that is the king's power to allow exceptions to the law) had been *invented* by James' advisers. In reality the origins of this power can be traced back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Henry III was the first king to dispense (Edie 1977:435).

William – of course – was depicted as a deliverer, rather than a conqueror. His army – according to the document – was large enough only to protect him from the *violence* of James' *evil counsellors*. The *Declaration* said nothing about William's future role in England's government (or James', for that matter). It stated: *This our expedition is intended for no other design but to have a free and lawful parliament assembled as soon as possible* (Prall 1972:317).

The charge that James' son was a fraud was also included. *But, to crown all*, the document read:

*those evil counsellors ... have published that the Queen hath brought forth a son; though there hath appeared both during the Queen's pretended bigness, and in the manner in which the birth was managed, so many just and visible grounds of suspicion that not only we ourselves, but all the good subjects of those kingdoms, do vehemently suspect that the pretended Prince of Wales was not borne by the Queen* (Prall 1972:317).

The *Declaration of Reasons* appeared in four languages: English, Dutch, German and French. Twenty-one editions appeared in 1688, eight of them in English. The manifesto was distributed all over the British Isles and widely dispersed on the Continent as well (Schwoerer 1977:854).

The *Declaration of Reasons* was far from being the only instrument of propaganda used by William and his friends before the invasion. Printed broadsides were addressed to the English soldiers urging them to go over to William's side. Pamphlets appeared which portrayed William's character and his purposes in the most favourable light. Eventually, when William landed in Devon in November 1688, only about a thousand of James' soldiers went over to the Prince (Speck 1987:461). The scale of the desertion was small – which must have disappointed William – but it was large enough to shatter James' morale to such an extent as to make him unable to fight. The king ordered his army to retreat, sent his wife and baby son to France, and later on found refuge at the court of Louis XIV himself. Nobody had expected this.

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*of the Protestant Religion and for Restoring the Lawes and Liberties of England, Scotland and Ireland.* It can be consulted in Cobett, W. (ed.) 1806-20. *The Parliamentary History of England* (36 Vols.) V. London. 1-11. Extracts from this document too can be found in the *Appendices* of Stuart Prall's above-mentioned book.

Many of those who had cooperated with William had done so only to be able to put pressure on James to change his policies. James' flight created a new situation and William began to revise his plans. Whatever his earlier intentions, now he looked to the throne, and started a new campaign of propaganda.

Between December 1688 and March 1689 eight new newspapers appeared and a large number of broadsides and pamphlets were printed (Schwoerer 1977:856). One of the aims of this new propaganda was to make William appear kingly to the English public. Physically the would-be-king was unattractive. He was short (just over five and a half feet tall), thin and frail, with a hump on his back. His health was poor. He suffered from chronic asthma. The pamphleteers, nevertheless, attributed to him a *robust and healthy* constitution. William was known to be cold, reserved, taciturn, irritable and short-tempered, yet the propagandists called him *benign, affable* and of *sweet temper* (Schwoerer 1977:849-850).

In order to influence the illiterate masses as well, pictures, playing cards and medals were also used in the propaganda. The designers of most of this material were Dutch, the masters of pictorial propaganda in Europe. One of the most frequently used symbols was the windmill. This was an allusion to another rumour: that James II's baby boy was in reality the son of a miller. The clear intention to shape public opinion and to influence even the lower classes suggests that the Anglo-Dutch Revolution was more than a simple *coup d'état*, carried out by a small number of people (Schwoerer 1977: 861; 874).

The effect of William's propaganda is not easy to assess. It is possible to argue – as Lois G. Schwoerer has done – that William became king *partly because of the success of his propaganda effort*, but this is not certain at all. The idea that a *broad consensus* in William's favour had been achieved is difficult to accept (Schwoerer 1977:847). The Convention that opened at Westminster on 22 January, could not even agree on the most fundamental questions. There were serious disagreements over the interpretation of the events of November and December 1688. What had actually happened? Had James abdicated the government, or had he simply deserted it, and so he was still king? Some argued that the king had been forced to leave by a successful rebellion, but that this was illegal. Another idea was that James had broken the *original contract* and, therefore, he had lost his right to be king. Some suggested that William had conquered England. Interestingly enough, in different ways, both the friends and enemies of King James used this latter argument.

The other question that divided the Convention was: what should be done in the absence of a monarch? Some recommended the unconditional recall of James, others his restoration together with limitations on the royal prerogative. There were five other serious suggestions: *a Regency, the crowning of Mary, the crowning of William, the crowning of William and Mary together, and a republican remodelling of the government* (Thompson 1977:34-36).

On 28 January the House of Commons voted that King James had *abdicated the government*, and that the throne was *vacant*. The Lords disagreed. Many regarded

a vacant throne a constitutional nonsense. Under the hereditary system the throne could not be vacant: either James II was still the king, or his daughter Mary was queen, or James' little son was king.

Eventually William lost his patience and intervened. He declared that unless he was given the crown, he would return to his own country, leaving England to the mercy of King James and his French supporters. It was this ultimatum, rather than the success of William's propaganda that made a compromise possible as a result of which William and Mary became joint sovereigns. In fact, as circumstances changed during the winter of 1688-89, William's propaganda – and especially his *Declaration of Reasons* – became a liability. The Jacobites were able to turn the *Declaration's* own arguments against William. The *Declaration* had made no mention of deposing King James (let alone William's intention to become king), and the document had limited the Prince's aims to the calling of Parliament. Thus, the *Declaration* could now be used as an anti-Williamite weapon.<sup>5</sup> The warming pan legend also became inconvenient for William and his supporters, and had to be dropped as a justification for the Revolution. There were two main reasons for this. First, it was – of course – impossible to prove that a fraud had occurred. Second, the warming pan legend did not fit in with William's political aims. If William had gone to England to defend Mary's hereditary right, *it seemed appropriate to put Mary on the throne as James II's legitimate heir* (Weil 1992:71).

Parliament had little choice in deciding the succession, but it played a major role in legitimating it. A unique constitutional arrangement was agreed on. The Commons accepted that the crown was hereditary and not elective, and recognised the rights of Princess Mary. The Lords agreed to make an exception in favour of William, and to *elect* him king in this emergency situation. The crown was offered jointly to William and Mary. A dual monarchy was created, but administrative power was vested in William alone. Although it was widely believed that Mary was a regnant queen, she was legally and in reality little more than a consort queen. This deception helped to win a consensus for the settlement.<sup>6</sup> When William was out of the country, Mary was able to exercise authority only as regent, but not even as regent did she possess *genuine sovereign power* (Schwoerer 1989:717).

In conclusion we can say that the traditional Whig story – the framework of which had been provided by William's propaganda – needs to be corrected on a number of points. There was nothing inevitable about the Revolution. The events of 1688-89 must be placed and studied in an international setting. The Revolution was – essentially – William's revolution. If English discontent had not coincided with William's ambitions in foreign policy, James II would have remained king.

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion of this topic see Claydon, T. 1996. "William III's Declaration of Reasons and the Glorious Revolution." [in:] *The Historical Journal*. 39. 87-108.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of this point see Nenner, H. 1992. "Pretense and Pragmatism: the Response to Uncertainty in the Succession Crisis of 1689." [in:] Schwoerer, L. G. (ed.) *The Revolution of 1688-1689—Changing Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. 83-94.

William saved England from a Catholic absolutism, but he was not a selfless hero. In 1688-89 he represented the national interests of the United Provinces, rather than those of England. This Anglo-Dutch Revolution could have worked out differently, but James' unexpected flight transformed the situation, which William was able to exploit. William's network of contacts and his systematic propaganda helped to avoid bloodshed in England, but it was his ultimatum that secured him the throne, rather than the success in shaping public opinion. The consequences of the Anglo-Dutch Revolution were positive. Among other things, a limited monarchy was established, a modern system of finance emerged, and a new executive was created. Yet these were not the direct results of the revolution settlement. They were *the fruits of war*,<sup>7</sup> the consequences of Britain's involvement in the great struggle against France.

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<sup>7</sup> The term is used by Geoffrey Holmes. See Chapters 16 and 17 of his 1995. *The Making of a Great Power*. London: Longman.