

HISTORY This Week EP 413: Britain Axes the Monarchy

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. January 30, 1649...and January 30, 1661. I'm Sally Helm.

London, 1649. A morning so cold that the river Thames is frozen over.

King Charles awakes in his room at St. James Palace. he asks his servants for an extra-thick shirt. He doesn't want to shiver in front of his enemies—then they might think he's afraid.

Although...of *course* King Charles is afraid. England has just been through a long, exhausting Civil War. The monarchy has been overthrown and the power to rule has been handed to Parliament. To the people. The first thing they've done is try King Charles in court, convict him of treason, and condemn him to death. Today, England is going to execute its king.

At ten am, the bishop who once bowed to the monarch's authority knocks on Charles's door and leads him across St. James Park to Whitehall Palace. Around noon, guards formerly trained to obey his every whim now usher him through a royal hall towards the scaffold. On the ceiling above, a magnificent painting that Charles himself had commissioned shows his father, King James the First, ascending to heaven on the wings of an eagle. That's how the English people, until very recently, had viewed their monarchs: As semi-divine. Answerable only to God.

That...is over.

Charles now stands outside in the frigid air beside a chopping block. He proclaims his innocence and insists he's a good Christian. At one point, his eye strays to the executioner, who, Charles notices, is casually stroking the blade of the ax. Charles breaks off his speech to plead: "Take heed of the ax. Pray, take heed of the ax." The once-absolute ruler is asking the man to make sure the ax is kept sharp...so that his death will, at least, be swift.

Finally, Charles gathers up his hair into a white nightcap and lays his head on the block. After a few still moments, the king extends his hands. The signal that he's ready. A flash of steel. The ax falls. The king is dead.

And so, it seems, is the monarchy. The country will soon be led by an enlightened government. The Parliamentarians in power will attempt to transform Britain into a functioning republic—one of the first in history.

...until January 30, 1661. That's when royalist forces will dig up the decaying corpse of the man who'd taken over after King Charles. They'll cut off its head and place it on a spike. And the monarchy will be back.

Today: a brief experiment in life without a king. Who was Oliver Cromwell, the man who led Britain's bold, new, democratic era? And how did it all go wrong?

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: To even begin to understand what people might be feeling, as they watch an executioner hold up the severed head of King Charles the first, we're going to have to consider the ten years of bloodshed that led up to this moment: The Civil War.

Its causes are hard to summarize. But if anyone can do it, it's Martyn Bennett, a history professor at Nottingham Trent University and the author of a dozen books on the war. We asked him to tell us a streamlined version of the story. He tried...

Martyn Bennett: Um, um...the...I haven't even got to the beginning, have I?

Sally Helm: It is not easy. Even for Martyn Bennett. But the story is certainly dramatic. After all, it ends with the death of a king.

And it kind of starts with that same king. A man who ruled with total authority. Who was apparently a gentle father, a shy man—but that shyness made him come off as haughty. He wasn't very good at talking to people.

Martyn Bennett: We could describe Charles as a fairly incompetent monarch.

Sally Helm: People start to *really* dislike Charles. He has this arrogant vibe, and he is also clearly enamored of his own power. He doesn't let anyone sit in his presence except for his wife—everyone else has to stand. And he's bad at collaborating. When Parliament doesn't give him his way, he dissolves it.

Martyn Bennett: The king was not ruling in a traditional manner. He believed that he could do without parliament as a regular part of government.

Sally Helm: For eleven years, he governs on his own. The English may have been used to near-absolute rulers, but this was too much.

Martyn Bennett: And therefore, the parliamentarians or those who had become the parliamentarians, thought that the king was potentially a tyrant, but probably were hoping that he could be brought into line in some way.

Sally Helm: Those Parliamentarians will eventually resort to war. But at least at first...they aren't rejecting the idea of *any* king. Just the way *Charles* was ruling as king.

This group includes many people. But the one who will become most well-known is a Member of Parliament, or MP, named Oliver Cromwell.

Historian Peter Gaunt told us, Cromwell is one of the most vivid and complex figures in all of English history.

Peter Gaunt: A man who was willing to stand up to the accepted traditions of government, risk a huge amount, including his life for a cause that he believed in passionately.

Sally Helm: Gaunt is a professor at the University of Chester, and president of the Cromwell Association.

Peter Gaunt: There's also a more mundane reason why I'm attracted to that period, and that is that the records, from the 1640s, 1650s are almost always in English rather than in Latin. And my Latin is not very good.

Sally Helm: Gaunt told us, that trail of records only starts to emerge in detail in Cromwell's later life. We don't know much about his early years. He was born in 1599, to a family of relative wealth, he lived in the English countryside, and then was elected to Parliament at the age of 28—just a year before King Charles suspended it.

While Charles is ruling without Parliament and not allowing any of his courtiers to sit down in his presence, Oliver Cromwell is coming into his own.

Peter Gaunt: If I met him, I would expect to meet someone who was reasonably intelligent, who was reasonably outgoing, engaged and engaging. I would expect to meet someone who is very religious.

Sally Helm: That religious side appears when Oliver Cromwell is in his thirties.

He becomes a devout Puritan. The Puritans believe in having a personal relationship with God. And for the rest of his life, Cromwell will say that this is what he's been granted: a direct line to God. This gives him a lot of clarity. And less tolerance of his enemies. *If God is directing my actions, he reasons, then those who oppose me, especially on the battlefield, are working against God.*

In 1642, the long-running tensions between the Parliamentarians and the crown break out into full-blown civil war. And that is when Oliver Cromwell starts rising to power.

Peter Gaunt: And indeed, he was one of the earliest people to take a military stance, so he was a determined parliamentarian throughout. He believed it was a godly war. He was doing the right thing.

Sally Helm: Cromwell raises a cavalry unit to fight against the Royalists.

Peter Gaunt: Even though he had no serious military experience before the Civil War broke out, he became a dynamic military leader, he was rapidly promoted.

Sally Helm: By 1645, he's second in command of the Parliamentarians' main national army.

In combat, Cromwell has what biographer Ronald Hutton describes as "a savage streak." He arranges his cavalry units in tight formation—thousands of mounted soldiers riding knee to knee—then slices through the lines of Royalist troops. Afterwards, he exults in the deaths of his enemies. After all, he considers them "enemies of God."

By early 1648, Cromwell and the Parliamentarians have won. King Charles has surrendered and been imprisoned...but keeps rejecting Parliament's attempts to negotiate. The question now becomes, *what do we do with him?*

Peter Gaunt: There's a very intensive prayer meeting at Windsor in late April, early May 1648. They come to believe that it was God who had supported them, not only in taking up arms against Charles, but was willing them on to Regicide.

Sally Helm: Regicide. To kill the king. Cromwell reportedly calls it a "cruel necessity." He's third of the 59 Parliamentarians who eventually sign the death warrant. But:

Martyn Bennett: Cromwell hasn't thought all of this through, and in many ways, none of them had. And they got a lot of the details wrong.

Sally Helm: Martyn Bennett again.

Martyn Bennett: They forgot, for example, that when Charles I was dead, his son would automatically be king.

Sally Helm: They don't want that. Charles's son just spent years fighting on his father's behalf, against the Parliamentarians.

Martyn Bennett: So, they had to delay the execution for a couple of hours in order to pass another act that made it illegal to proclaim Charles II.

Sally Helm: They pass that act. And *then*...they execute Charles I.

A huge crowd shows up to watch the ax fall. Some of them are shocked. Some of them are distraught. But Professor Bennett told us, overall, the public is surprisingly calm about the whole thing.

Martyn Bennett: Most of the ordinary people don't really seem to have been that bothered. I think what they wanted by 1649 after 10 years of warfare was stability. And if this brought about stability, they would put up with it.

Sally Helm: So: a decade of unrest has led to the death of the king. And now, the Parliamentarians are in charge.

Sally Helm: What is the plan that Cromwell and his allies have in terms of instituting a new government when they do execute the king? Like do they know what they're going to do? Like, are they prepared?

Martyn Bennett: No. In general terms, there wasn't an overall plan. There was no consensus on what governance should look like once the war was over.

Sally Helm: It takes a few months. But the Parliamentarians essentially decide we don't want anything resembling a monarch. And while we're at it, we don't want the part of Parliament that's populated by hereditary elites—the house of Lords. And then they go further. In mid-May of 1649, they declare England, Wales, and Ireland a republic. Ruled by the people.

This is a moment of great promise. Remember, the French Revolution, the American Revolution—those have not happened yet. England is early to the experiment in this kind of government.

But to fulfill that promise, they have to tamp down the royalists, who still aren't done fighting. The royalists have regrouped in Ireland and Scotland, so the Parliamentarians send out an army to bring them into line. An army led...by Oliver Cromwell.

Martyn Bennett: He is absolutely the best general in that period.

Peter Gaunt: It's that that gives him the real power base.

Sally Helm: Cromwell invades...and conquers. He spills rivers of blood. To this day, he's reviled by some people in these places for the body count he leaves behind—some consider him a war criminal for the brutality of his Irish campaign.

In the wake of those campaigns, the British Isles are united in a singular Commonwealth. This is before “the United Kingdom” existed—these separate nations had never before been ruled as one. They're led by Parliament. And by Oliver Cromwell. He's named president of a council tasked with implementing Parliament's will.

Cromwell believes his rise to power is guided by divine providence. “Who can fight against the Lord and prosper?” he writes in a letter. “Who can resist His will?”

But governing this newly unified nation is hard. It requires balance. Compromise. And Cromwell and his allies soon become impatient with Parliament's attempts to modify his proposals.

Peter Gaunt: It isn't moving forward the agenda of reform; it's no longer doing god's will.

Sally Helm: So...he turns to his primary power base, the army, to solve the problem.

Peter Gaunt: Cromwell by dint of being Lord General with military support, is able to lead a bloodless military coup in April 1653.

Sally Helm: His followers enter Parliament and expel its members. Two months later, Cromwell sets up what's called a “nominated assembly” to take its place—he and his Council hand-pick men that they consider “godly.” Godly or not, those men soon fall prey to gridlock. And after about six months, the assembly kind of just folds.

Peter Gaunt: The members of that nominated assembly actually resign their power back to Cromwell in December 1653. So, there's then a power vacuum.

Sally Helm: Into that vacuum springs an idea. It comes from a group of army officers. They've been watching this dysfunction and thinking, *we need a better governing plan here. Some kind of blueprint.* So, they write up a constitution. For a government with executive and legislative branches.

Peter Gaunt: They would appoint a chief magistrate, a head of state, but not a king, bound by all sorts of constitutional restrictions that a 17th century traditional Stuart monarch would never have accepted.

Sally Helm: This new head of state would be called the "lord protector."

Peter Gaunt: To nobody's surprise they choose the Lord General of the Army, Oliver Cromwell.

Martyn Bennett: He can do that balancing act between the army and the civilian world. So right man, right place, right talents, right political position.

Sally Helm: I wanna ask about this concept of the Lord Protector. What is that role? How's it different from a monarch and yeah. Just sort of what, what's up with that?

Martyn Bennett: The title Lord Protector, is a monarchical title.

Sally Helm: Hmm. Interesting.

Martyn Bennett: Yeah. It's someone who stands in for the king. If say the king was ill or the king was abroad, you might appoint a Lord protector to look after the state.

Sally Helm: The title is a bit of an odd choice.

Martyn Bennett: It does suggest it's possible that there might be a monarch further down the line.

Sally Helm: Right. Cause it sort of means someone who's kind of like keeping charge of the state while the monarch is too young or is sick or something.

Martyn Bennett: Yeah, so it was an effect in some ways, a reformed monarchy.

Sally Helm: As Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell looks kind of like a king. Here's Peter Gaunt:

Peter Gaunt: Cromwell is the glittering head of state. He presides on state occasions. He opens and closes parliament. He does get access to former royal palaces.

Sally Helm: But there are some key differences.

Peter Gaunt: Under the constitution, he can't do things by himself. Making peace and war. Appointing senior officers of state, he can't do that by himself. So, it's very much a balanced thing.

Sally Helm: Like the king before him, Lord Protector Cromwell holds his position for life. But *unlike* the king, he can't choose his successor. He's governed by a constitution. He needs to work *with* parliament to get things done.

It is an innovative and, for the time, unusual form of government. And Cromwell uses this new power to make some revolutionary changes. Martyn Bennett told us that, given Cromwell's fundamentalist faith, he grants a surprising amount of religious freedom.

Martyn Bennett: One of the things he learns from God, so he believes, is that as long as people are practicing Christians, and we could probably say Protestant as well, then God is content with that. His protectorate is a place where religious groups that he doesn't like, doesn't understand, can still flourish.

Sally Helm: Cromwell allows a Jewish community to form in England, for the first time in over 350 years. He promotes education and puts an end to capital punishment for petty crimes. He lowers taxes. That's of course popular with the public but bad for the national treasury's bottom line. He tries for a foreign policy victory by sending an invading force to the island of Hispaniola, now known as Haiti and the Dominican Republic. That expedition fails.

Peter Gaunt: There is a degree of experimentation going on. There's a mixed balance sheet. Some things go well, some things don't.

Sally Helm: Humming in the background is a problem that won't go away. A large faction in Parliament believes that the balance of power set out in the constitution, also known as the "instrument of government," is out of whack. In short, Cromwell is too powerful.

Peter Gaunt: That Parliament spends most of its lifespan trying to deconstruct the instrument of government and rewrite it.

Sally Helm: Cromwell disagrees with this. This whole setup, he says, was approved by "God and the people of these nations." But this time, Cromwell can't just disband Parliament to get his way. At least not immediately. Because the constitution says the Lord Protector must allow it to meet for at least five months.

This parliament starts meeting in September of 1654. So, its members, the MPs, think, okay *great, we've got October through February*.

Peter Gaunt: Cromwell, however, says these are *lunar* months. Five months equals 20 weeks and bang on 20 weeks. He dissolves the parliament somewhat earlier than the MPs were expecting.

Sally Helm: There will be no constitutional reform. But still: a large faction of Parliament wants to strip some of Cromwell's power. There's also a small Royalist uprising in March of 1655. And Cromwell feels all of these disturbances quite personally.

Peter Gaunt: I think they shake the confidence of Cromwell, and they cause him to seek God. And is this the right way?

Sally Helm: To purify his protectorate in God's eyes, Cromwell launches a mission to rid it of sin. He imposes military rule on England and Wales. Divides the country into military districts and sends in major generals to enforce order.

Peter Gaunt: There's a, a program of closing down ale houses and brothels to try and push England and Wales further on a godly direction and maybe win back God's love.

Sally Helm: But the military rule is deeply unpopular. It sows more discontent. And then in 1657, a group of people decides: we've got to get rid of Oliver Cromwell altogether.

Martyn Bennett: They tried to shoot him on his way to Westminster.

Sally Helm: Martyn Bennett told us; the assassins don't come from the place you might expect. They're not royalists. In fact, they're pro-democratic government reformers. People who had fought alongside Cromwell in the Civil War.

Martyn Bennett: Those who were more radical, who felt it should be a system that didn't have a single head of state. And feel that he's let them down.

Sally Helm: Cromwell has good security. The plot is foiled. And...if you are getting exhausted hearing about these constant power struggles—Parliament collapses, re-forms, gets shuttered again—just imagine how the people of England felt. They've been through years of war...only to enter a new period of ceaseless conflict. Almost enough to make you wish you could just have a king again. Get a little peace.

As it happens, that's what some members of the latest Parliament are thinking, too. This assassination attempt gets them really spooked.

Martyn Bennett: Parliament realizes, or a certain section of Parliament realizes that if Cromwell had been assassinated, there's no plan. Government would collapse, the Republic might collapse. Cromwell is the only man who can hold it together, and that's a problem for the state.

Sally Helm: So, in 1657, they decide: we have to do something drastic to restore stability.

Martyn Bennett: That's when they get together and offer him the crown.

Sally Helm: The crown. Now Oliver Cromwell has to decide: *Do I want to be king? Restore the monarchy that I myself helped destroy?*

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: In 1657, these members of Parliament decide that offering Cromwell the crown is the best way to stabilize Britain.

Cromwell takes the offer seriously. Peter Gaunt says, he thinks it over...and then thinks it over some more.

Peter Gaunt: Cromwell hesitates, there's a long period of introspection. He hides himself away. He's almost like the naughty student when a parliamentary committee comes and attends him and says, we want an answer today. He says, he's too ill. He's got an illness, so he won't meet them, and he puts it off. Several weeks where Cromwell, doesn't give an answer, he's clearly still mulling things over. He's looking for God to lead him.

Sally Helm: And then, at last, a breakthrough. Cromwell believes he has finally discerned God's will.

Peter Gaunt: He couches it in religious terms. I've seen the will of God. I will not seek to rebuild what God has righteously destroyed, and Cromwell believes that in 1649, God had not only spoken against the person of Charles I, but that God had spoken against the institution of monarchy and the crown.

Sally Helm: Cromwell rejects the crown. As long as he's alive, there will be no monarchy.

But Martyn Bennett tells us, Cromwell does accept some other parts of this new constitution. One in particular that Parliament hoped might stabilize the country in the case of disaster.

Martyn Bennett: The succession becomes hereditary. Now, hereditary in their sense didn't necessarily mean that it was the eldest son as it is in a monarchy, but it meant that Cromwell would nominate a successor.

Sally Helm: It has been eight years since the monarchy ended. Eight years since the promise emerged of a representative system of government. Of a country no longer dependent upon, and beholden to, one man.

But much has happened since then to dash the dream. And when Oliver Cromwell suddenly falls ill at the age of 59, something a lot like the old system kicks in. As he lies on his deathbed, stricken with malaria, witnesses say that Cromwell whispers he's leaving the title of Lord Protector to his third son, Richard.

Martyn Bennett: In many ways, nobody knows who Richard Cromwell is in 1658, when Oliver dies.

Sally Helm: Oliver Cromwell is dead and now all eyes turn to Richard. Who, Peter Gaunt says, has spent most of his life on the sidelines.

Peter Gaunt: The problem with Richard is he's got no real military pedigree. Too young to have played any military role in the civil wars in the 1640s. He's a Protestant, but he hasn't got the sort of godly fire that his father Oliver had.

Sally Helm: Richard is out of depth from the moment he's named Lord Protector. Parliament and the army begin to feud. And neither group will heed him.

Martyn Bennett: It was chaos.

Sally Helm: In the spring of 1659, Martyn Bennett tells us, a military coup forces Richard to abdicate.

Martyn Bennett: Richard just disappears into obscurity. He has a false name, but everybody knows who he is, though he is got a false name. He's living in the house a man called Richard Cromwell had lived in for some time.

Sally Helm: Now the state is rudderless again. And the people are even more exhausted. So, Parliament essentially gives up. They reverse all the changes of the last decade. A group of MPs gets in touch with the heir of Charles I, Charles the second.

Martyn Bennett: And in the end, rather surprisingly, to him, it is the parliament that recalls him and asks him to come home.

Sally Helm: The monarchy is restored. Martyn Bennett told us, it's like a factory reset. When all else fails, reboot to the previous system: in this case, the king. The devil you know.

In May of 1660, Charles the second arrives in London. It's his thirtieth birthday. And the Stuart monarchy is restored.

A new set of royal crown jewels is made—the originals had been melted into coins and sold off when Charles I was executed. And King Charles II tries to move the country forward. He announces that he will pardon all crimes committed during the Civil War.

Except...there's one group that Charles II and the royalists are not inclined to pardon. The regicides. Chief among them...Oliver Cromwell. They still have a bone to pick with him.

Martyn Bennett: What happens is a, is a, I think a, a national disgrace, digging him out from the tombs they'd been buried in in Westminster.

Sally Helm: Charles II allows Cromwell's decaying body to be exhumed...and then beheaded.

Martyn Bennett: And his head, as you did with the heads of traitors, it was covered in tar and put on a pike and stuck on the roof of Westminster for some years till it blew down in a storm.

Sally Helm: The ritual execution happens on January 30, 1661. Exactly twelve years after our story began.

Today, Cromwell's protectorate is called the Interregnum, or the period "between reigns." It was an experiment in representational government. A time of promise that, in the end, flamed out. The thought of it pains Martyn Bennett.

Martyn Bennett: I think it's incredibly disappointing, in a way that we had a wonderful opportunity for reforming government and the country, and we threw it away largely through carelessness. And the irony is that in Europe and the United States, it's taken much more seriously because they borrowed bits from it. The American Revolution has often been described as a second British revolution. The same issues about franchise, about taxation, about responsibility for government were all issues from the Civil War period. The French Revolution borrowed wholesale

from the British Revolution. And we know that Robespierre and Napoleon and Napoleon's brothers all read histories of the Civil War period, in particular of Oliver Cromwell.

Sally Helm: Oliver Cromwell. A man who led an early attempt to organize a country based on constitutional principles. And who, though he believed himself to be an instrument of God, fell short of the task.

[CREDITS]

Sally Helm: Thanks for listening to History This Week. For more moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today. If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail: 212-351-0410.

Thanks to our guests: Martyn Bennett, professor of early modern history at Nottingham Trent University and author of several books including *Cromwell at War: The Lord General and His Military Revolution*; and Peter Gaunt, professor of history at the University of Chester and author/editor of books that include two Cromwell biographies, both entitled *Oliver Cromwell*. For more on Cromwell's rise to power, check out *The Making of Oliver Cromwell* by Ronald Hutton.

This episode was produced by Julia Press. It was story edited by Jim O'Grady and sound designed by Dan Rosato. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Corinne Wallace, and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

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