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Hilaire Belloc: Charles's Passion Begins

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American Region

CCCLXII Anniversary of the Royal Martyrdom Issue
January, 2011 • Part I



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ISSN 2153-6120

BACK ISSUES OF SKCM NEWS AND THE EMAIL COMMUNIQUÉ ARE POSTED AT THE AMERICAN REGION'S WEBSITE

HILAIRE BELLOC, pictured below, in *Charles I King of England* (1933) takes us through the two-month period leading up to the beheading of the King. The details of that act, a martyrdom to those of us who venerate Charles as the Martyr-King, from the pens of other authors, will follow with the 'trial', in a second part of this January issue.

Charles was human, and thus not perfect. 'Imperfect' has often been said of his 'leadership style', as a modern opportunist might call it. Such a person may decide what to do based on 'how it will play', a cynical and unprincipled basis for decision-making favored by dictators. Belloc's account leaves no doubt that Cromwell was one such: a dictator, not a champion of liberty. For opportunists, form triumphs over substance and Truth is variable. King Charles always knew right from wrong, and recognized Truth, but his actions could still be at variance. To understand Charles, the Saint, one must read and study the *Eikon Basilike*. (Readily available from libraries, interlibrary loan, and to read online.) One will then see why the King's last two months on earth are called his Passion.

In part II of this January 2011, issue, we will portray the shocking beheading of the King.

In negotiations different approaches are tried and tactics are tested, parties are played off against each other, 'trial balloons', 'red herring', and 'straw men' are commonplace. The King's enemies found documents evidencing such tactics and chose to call them duplicitous. There were arguments leading to different positions. The rebels were changing daily, as various groups joined them or became disenchanted. When rebutting the King's Book, one of the worst moral flaws Milton was able to come up with was that the King read Shakespeare. Why was Shakespeare a poor choice of reading material? Because the King read him, a textbook example of a circular argument.

But King Charles was a good man. He was faithful to his obligations, including his pledges to his father⁽¹⁾, marriage vows⁽²⁾, and oaths such as the Coronation Oath (a point of honor of which Oliver Cromwell took advantage), the latter making his death certain. That he would be a martyr was revealed to him starting about two years before his beheading⁽³⁾, when he said in a letter to the Marquis of Ormonde, "I must reign a glorious King or die a patient martyr." Only two months before his death, during pointless negotiations at Newport, he clearly stated, in what is called his 'Declaration', the main reason he would die. The point of conscience was based on his understanding of Scripture and Tradition, his pledge to his father, and his Coronation Oath.

"I conceive that Episcopal Government is most consonant to the Word of God, and of an apostolical institution, as it appears by the Scripture, to have been practiced by the Apostles themselves, and by them committed, and derived to particular persons as their substitutes or successors therein and hath ever since to these last times been exercised by Bishops in all the Churches of Christ, and therefore I cannot in conscience consent to abolish the said government."

For our Society "to win general recognition of the great debt owed to Charles Stuart" (*Objects*), three things need to be understood: (i) How the killing of the King was brought about, (ii) how King Charles prepared for his martyrdom (for that is what it was, and that is how he saw it), and (iii) what actually happened on the scaffold. In this Jan. issue of our e-publication, we quote a few of Hilaire Belloc's words from "The Killing of the King" (the 14th and last chapter of his biography of King Charles) to set the stage. He writes about point (i). In a second, Feb. issue, coinciding with the Martyrdom itself, we will select from works that address point (iii). For us who are members of the Society, a fourth point logically follows: it compels us (iv) to tell others, especially our co-religionists,

what Charles accomplished through his martyrdom. Some of them are uninformed, some perhaps well-inclined but bedeviled by the demon emplaced during primary school, who says “Good Cromwell, bad King Charles”, and some, misinformed and obstinate. Let us learn from Belloc’s narrative.

From Hilaire Belloc’s *Charles I King of England*

“The last two months of the King’s life on earth are an episode separate from all the rest. The decision had been taken. He was openly marked for death.

“Cromwell had been at work for long and now the time had come when the thing could be done, subject, of course, to his continued skill in the handling of the forces in action. From the beginning of December, 1648, to the last moments on the scaffold at the end of January, 1649, what goes on is tragically new. Negotiations lose their meaning; the hopes still entertained—even by Charles himself—lose all their substance; they become shadows. The succession of days is a direct procession to the scaffold. Those two months are in their entirety the killing of the King and the flowering of Cromwell’s long-matured plan.

“The story has been told a thousand times. Its smallest physical details have been examined and re-examined. Every site, every recorded word, has passed through three centuries of criticism. Nothing can be told on these that is not known and even a commonplace. Yet there is here, as in all the tragedy of Charles’s life, the element of a problem to be solved, and if few do not solve it aright we misunderstand even those clear-cut sixty days of doom.

“In the first place we must understand that the Army was now not only supreme, but stood alone. There was now no other power. There remained to the simulacrum of a Parliament the prestige of its name and (what is always important in political affairs) the momentum of the past. Men had thought in terms of Parliamentary authority as opposed to Royal authority for a quarter of a century; those two terms had been the antagonists of the war; the royal authority having been destroyed under arms, only the term of Parliamentary authority remained. But its exercise in practice had ceased. It retained the name of ruler but had already lost the power thereof. It had really lost that power as early as that day, eighteen months before, when Cromwell had sent Joyce to seize the person of the King; but the open admitted loss of it had come by various stages—when the Parliament had failed to disband the troops, when its orders had been repeatedly disobeyed, when it had been roughly handled without any punishment for the assault being possible and—the last blow—when its orders against the removal of the King from the Isle of Wight were openly disobeyed.

“But so much remained to the ghost of Parliamentary authority as was necessary for those who would act, that is, for the soldiers, to use the mere name of Parliament as a sanction for what they did.



Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953)

“Now when we say that the Army by this time, December, 1648, completely controlled and that all real authority had passed to it, that is equivalent to saying that all real authority had passed to Cromwell. Men in the plural, especially men in great numbers, even men corporate, cannot carry out a plan from stage to stage with precision; such action is not possible to acephalous mankind—and that is why Cabinets bungle war.

“Here, in the killing of Charles Stuart, was a plan carried out most carefully over many months, step after step after step: first the capture of the person of the King, then the granting of relaxation to him, even of some honour, in the hope that he might be used for the plotter’s purpose; then on the failure of this, and on the determination to kill him, an accurate series of measures leading on to a pre-conceived conclusion. He was spurred on to escape, secret facilities were given him for doing so, he was shepherded to a place where he could be under a particular control and inaccessible to all save by permission of that control; the cry for his death was next raised, in grows louder, it spreads

among the troops and falls from the pens of pamphleteers, the time is not yet quite ripe, there is still insurrection and invasion designed to save the King. The invasion and insurrection are easily mastered—and then indeed the carefully fostered clamour for a victim can be taken up and an official thing made of it.

“To be able to wait for the precise moment after which a policy long matured can be openly declared is the very mark of a genius for intrigue. See how all this process has behind it the will and intelligence of Cromwell, from the day when (he remaining in the background) his agent seizes the King’s person to the day when (he not presiding nor putting himself forward as the chief) he makes sure of the verdict and compels the signature of the Warrant.

“There is not one man acting *throughout* that is not his; one of his creatures originates the cry for the King’s death; another creature and close relative is the King’s gaoler at Hampton Court, the man who delivered the menacing letter and facilitated the King’s false escape; yet another creature and relative has Charles in bond during all those months in the Isle of Wight; it is Cromwell himself who comes there to give orders; to Cromwell are reported by his secret intelligence service the further attempts at evasion; it is Cromwell who sets the last warders to their task. Yet, there is one will and one plan behind it all, and they belittle Oliver Cromwell who think to do his memory a favour by pleading his reluctance or his ignorance. If such action were evil (and it was not evil to men with the code of Cromwell’s religion, which knew nothing of, or rather was opposed to, the code of honour) it is none the less great. To wait so patiently, to grasp so many factors in their right proportion, to note the exact time for action and to obtain a final decision is Generalship. And of all his contemporaries no other showed Generalship but Cromwell alone in this matter of compassing the death of the King.

“In the dead of the long night between Monday, the 18th of December, and Tuesday, the 19th, at the very turn of the winter darkness, the King heard the noise of horse approaching Hurst Castle drawbridge and the words of command. He waked in alarm and bade Herbert find out what was this stir, who returned and told him that Colonel Harrison had come. At that name ‘Harrison’ the King was too much moved; it was a name which he associated with sudden death, for he had been awfully told that Harrison himself would do the deed. Yet Harrison did not come to act the murder with his own hand, he came with his mounted men to take the King away, upon that long and interrupted road to London which was to end as we know.

“Let us here understand by its dates the secret plan which was so thoroughly carried out by its author.

“The first thing we note is the connection between the actions of the Army (that is, of him who was moving all) and the events which were being watched by the plotters with such anxiety, lest their plans should miscarry. On the very day that Charles had suddenly been taken by force from the Island a council of Officers had denounced the Parliamentary majority and warned ‘all good people’ to put themselves under the protection of the soldiers.

“*The very day after* Charles’s first settlement in Hurst Castle several regiments were marched on to London. The first two were chosen for the violence of feeling among the men, and especially the regiment of Hewson—himself the most fanatical of the commanders. The idea of the whole proceeding was to strike terror, and in this it thoroughly succeeded. Hewson was given for quarters the Royal Palace of Whitehall. Pride, a singular character, commanded the other regiment, which was quartered in St. James’s; he was an illiterate man, risen through some military aptitude and also strength of will and lack of scruple. He had begun life by driving a cart for a brewer, ‘Character,’ as it is called today, he had in plenty, and it is remarkable how much he was hated even among his colleagues.

“So far the threat was to Westminster only and not directly to the City, though the City was overawed, knowing that its turn would come next. Then began that military occupation of London which was to be so much increased, until the soldiers openly ruled. That military occupation of the City lasted without interruption for eleven years.

“What was left of the Parliament rallied, oddly enough, in spite of the military threat surrounding it; but its authority the Commissioners of the Commons had gone down to treat with the King at Newport; to it had those Commissioners reported the terms which Charles would accept; in a sort of desperation they made their last effort to affirm bravely that supremacy which they had long lost. In their numbers (under half the full complement of the House, less than 250 men) there was an opposition which sided in varying degrees with the military party. Therefore there was fierce debate

all through Monday, the 4th of December, and on, right through the night; it was not until the morning of Tuesday, the 5th, that the wrangle ended from exhaustion and that a vote was taken. Then solemnly, as though they were still in the days of their power, the maimed Commons registered a decision in favor of accepting the King's terms. It was a sufficient majority: one of 44 in a House of 244 members: sufficient—but also without any effect. For on the next day, Wednesday, the 6th of December, Colonel Pride came down with his batch of soldiers to the doors of the House, turned away all those who had been suspected of resisting the Army, even in intention (and among those thus turned away were included not a few even of the members who had voted in the minority for refusing the King's terms). Altogether less than fifty men were allowed to enter the House and were bidden, or permitted, to call themselves the House of Commons still. Yet such was the force of the mere name 'Parliament' that this petty fragment was retained with that name attached to it, in order that it might do the work required of it by Cromwell, one of its members.

"That soldier was on his way back from the north, where, after his victory over the Scottish invasion, he had visited Edinburgh. He had many days since turned him homeward. It is to be remarked again that he was deliberately slow in his progress; he actually halted well outside London on the critical day when his work was being done for him by Pride, and the House of Commons reduced to the jest it had now become. He did not enter London until the next day, Thursday, the 7th of December. Further regiments were marched in as the week ended. The nave of old St. Paul's was turned into a barracks and the church fearfully desecrated, the treasure of the Parliament (£35,000 in gold, what we should today [1933] call a quarter of a million) was seized by the command of the Army and taken off in five carts. Then, all during that week-end, to enslave the City and keep it thoroughly in hand, regiments of foot and troops of horse paraded up and down through the streets.

"Note the next coincidence, or rather the next exact timing of a military plan conducted as though it were a campaign, for there was behind it all the brain of a man now trained in the conduct of campaigns. The moment when proceedings against the King were first discussed by the remaining fragment of the House of Commons was also that moment in which Charles was beginning his long imprisonment in Windsor. This was because he must now be kept close at hand, within a day of London, to be moved up at the right moment. Cromwell reached St. James's on the night of the 19th of December, on the same day as Charles was taken from Hurst Castle. On the morrow, the 20th, was made the first suggestion of the trial which was to come. It was made in a House of only 43 members.

"While this was proceeding in London the King rode up through the New Forest and on to Winchester, where the Mayor and authorities of the town paid loyal service. On the next day, Wednesday, the 20th, to Farnham, and so up the road. Upon the noon of Saturday, the 23rd of December, there had been planned yet another attempt at escape, which failed as all had done. It was luck; the fast horse that was ready fell lame. But would any trickery have evaded the guard? He dined at Bagshot Park; he lay that night in the Castle at Windsor, sleeping in the old room which he had used in the better times at the end of Castle ward, and the gentleman who served him lying in the dressing-room attached, the window of which looks out over Eton.

"There he remained a full four weeks; it was not till Friday, the 19th of January, 1649, that he was to be taken on the last stage to London. He still hoped. Wherever he had passed he had noted the attitude of the people, in Windsor itself there had been on his arrival quite a throng, not only of the townspeople, but of men of his party, loyal men who had ridden in from outside, and that same evening there were brawls between them and the soldiers—ten troops of horse which formed the escort of Harrison's command.

"His Christmas Day, a Monday, he had passed in state; and as they would not allow him the ministrations of the Church of England he read the service himself with solemnity. On the Wednesday came the order that he was no longer to be treated with the ceremonial of kingship. The cup was not to be offered to him with a genuflection, nor his dishes brought covered to table, nor the trumpets sounded at his meals. Therefore, for what he could save of his dignity, he determined to dine alone, and it was the easier for him because the greater part of his attendants had also been withdrawn. Move from his prison he could not; his exercise was pacing up and down the long terrace, and for his solace he would pass hours in what Milton so curiously condemned in him, the reading of Shakespeare's plays.

"During that month of silence and segregation alone, all was moving at Westminster for the setting up of the final scene. On that same Saturday before Christmas, the 23rd of December, on

which Charles had reached Windsor, the remnant of the House of Commons, the little group who still worked there as the servants of the Armn, and therefore of its only true commander, proceeded obediently to demand the life of the King. Even among them there was some opposition, perhaps for the sake of form and to give some pretence of reality to the proceedings. But the bulk of those present, 38 members, were formed into a committee to arrange the affair and once again we find on that committee (and the leading manager of it) a creature of Cromwell's, Marten.

"Even as it was, from that committee not a few slunk away, for the responsibility was heavy. But those who remained proposed that a declaration should be made as of law, and they solemnly voted that it was High Treason in the King of England to levy war against the Parliament. The vote was taken on New Year's Day, a week after the committee had formed, and on that same Monday the House passed an 'Ordinance' setting up a High Court of Justice. The legal pedantry which runs through the whole of that time—for the lawyers had been half the spirit of it—was not absent. This High Court of Justice was to try a 'question of fact,' and the 'question of fact' they were to try was whether Charles Stuart, King of England, had been guilty of such treason as they had defined.

"Of the House of Lords at that time, seven would at the most assemble to carry on the figment of continuity; but now that there was an opportunity of saving skins, fifteen appeared and these unanimously refused the Ordinance. Which meant nothing. Nothing did mean anything at this moment but the will of the Army and its real chief. For within the week, on Twelfth Day, the 6th of January, the 'House of Commons' (that is, the 46 men present) voted that in future they would make Acts of Parliament without Lords of King. They proceeded to set up a sort of Jury of Commission to try their Sovereign. They filled the list with 150 names, drawn from among themselves and from such in the City, and Inns of Court and the Officers of the Army as they thought they could count upon; yet in the event but a fraction of these consented to serve.

"Three days later, Cromwell himself speaking in their midst upon the question of a new Great Seal to be used in the new regime, gave a last and interesting example of his caution in avoiding the first place, though he was the strength of all. 'If any man whatsoever have carried on this design of deposing the King and disinheriting his posterity he must be the greatest traitor and rebel in the world.' So he spoke. And then balanced it with further words, 'but since the Providence of God has cast this upon us, we cannot but submit to Providence.'

"On Wednesday, the 10th of January, the Commissioners who were to form the Court gathered in the Painted Chamber: there were 45 of them only. They had to choose a man for the perilous post of Chief Judge, or president. An obscure lawyer who had acted in a lesser judicial capacity in Chester, one John Bradshaw, was pitched upon, but only after more wary candidates had refused. Bradshaw also tried to be excused when he learnt the news, but he was lured by a sounding title, 'Lord President,' and promised a great reward—which indeed he got, for he was given the confiscated estates of Lord Cottington as well as permanent official salaries.

"On Monday, the 15th of January, the charge against the King was drafted, and when the date of trial was finally fixed for the end of the week, Charles was sent for from Windsor. He was taken there on Friday, the 19th. It was a noisy cavalcade with a strong mounted guard, Hugh Peters, the frenzied Puritan preacher, riding in front of it, the King in the midst, alone, in a coach drawn by six horses. They lodged him that night in St. James's, and on the next day, Saturday, the 20th of January, the trial opened in Westminster Hall.

"Only a part of the Hall was used, rather more than one-third of it to the southern end. There a raised platform had been set up with galleries above it where privileged spectators could have place. The King's Judges had benches set for them draped in scarlet, John Bradshaw on a higher chair in the midst. There were six such ranks; a space in front about 25 feet wide where the clerks sat at a table with the Mace and Sword thereon, and then, at the further edge of the platform, just in front of some steps that led up to it from the main hall, was a sort of dock wherein they all waited to see appearing the King.

"He had been brought that morning from St. James's in a fashion designed to avoid what Cromwell and his supporters most dreaded—the Royalist cries and perhaps the tumult of the populace. Bradshaw had provided himself with a bulletproof hat. They brought him through the Park, hustled him through Whitehall Palace and on to a barge at the landing stage by the riverside. But even there, on the water, there was a demonstration, those present cheering for the King; and the men who rowed refused to be covered; they worked bareheaded—in despite of the Army. The King

was landed at the stairs of that now ruinous old house which had been built for Cotton in Elizabeth's reign (it stood on the site now covered by the Houses of Parliament and about on a level with the modern statue of Richard I, only further east of course and nearer the river).

"The little figure of the King in his black clothes and great hat going up the garden path was seen by his Judges, who were waiting in the Painted Chamber before going into Westminster Hall. They saw him through a window giving on to the garden. Cromwell, who watched it with the others, showed, what was rare with him, some doubt.

"What shall we say,' he asked, 'if he shall deny the authority of the Court?' And again as always, though he knows the answer, it is not he, but one of his, who replies. For it was Marten who said, 'By the authority of the Commons and good people of England.'"

⁽¹⁾Charles regarded the instruction he received from his father with the utmost filial honor, respect, and reverence, and obeyed it dutifully. On the scaffold, this attitude was reflected in his vindication, "I die a Christian according to the profession of the Church of England, as I found it left me by my father."

⁽²⁾Charles, had he been as unscrupulous as Henry VIII, would have gained enormous political advantage by ridding himself of Henrietta Maria. This he would not consider, in faithfulness to his marriage vows, and further, after the first few turbulent years, he and Henrietta fell deeply in love, not coincidentally following Buckingham's assassination (1629), itself followed by the birth of the future Charles II in 1630. From this point we are talking about Henriette's family and thus use the French version of her name. Any move against Henriette would have been expedient beyond measure and acclaimed unanimously by the English. The French were disliked in general. Henriette's retinue were mostly French and Roman Catholic, unsurprisingly but resented, to put it mildly.

Henriette Marie was named after her parents, Henry IV, who converted to Catholicism in 1593, and Marie de Médicis, his second wife. Henry went on to promulgate the Edict of Nantes in 1598, meaning to pursue a conciliatory policy, which not all favored: He was assassinated in 1610, just before little Henriette reached six months of age. Henry's conversion was purely political, occasioning his cynical comment "*Paris vaut bien une messe*" (Paris is well worth a mass; sometimes attributed to his minister Sully). It was Henry IV who astutely observed that James I was "the wisest fool in Christendom."

Like her retinue, the Queen's large corps of chaplains, led by a bishop, were despised. Both of these groups had among their members *de facto* informants, thought by some to be frank spies. The frequent presence of Henriette's mother, Marie, France's Queen Mother, was likewise resented. Since she and her son for whom she had served as Regent, now King Louis XIII, were on poor terms, she chose to spend time at the English court with her Stuart grandchildren rather than at the French court at St-Germain.

⁽³⁾Some would say that this revelation had started already in 1626. At Charles's Coronation on 2 Feb. 1626 Bp. Senhouse preached on the text, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life", and in John Donne's first court sermon to the new King (also in 1626) Charles was exhorted to be ready to shed his blood as Christ had.

Donne had been chaplain to James I and was a favorite preacher of his and King Charles's. Ordained in 1615 at James I's express request, he was Dean of Saint Paul's from 1621 until his death in 1631. The famous statue of Donne, standing and wearing his burial shroud, miraculously survived the old Cathedral's destruction in the 1666 Great Fire and is now to be seen in Wren's New Saint Paul's. An admirer of Donne's poetry, T. S. Eliot was largely responsible for its increase in popularity during the XX Century.



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