



GOD'S



SECRETARIES

The Making of the King James Bible

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 perfectbound

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PREFACE

The making of the King James Bible, in the seven years between its commissioning by James VI & I in 1604 and its publication by Robert Barker, ‘Printer to the King’s Most Excellent Majestie’, in 1611, remains something of a mystery. The men who did it, who pored over the Greek and Hebrew texts, comparing the accuracy and felicity of previous translations, arguing with each other over the finest details of chapter and verse, were many of them obscure at the time and are generally forgotten now, a gaggle of fifty or so black-gowned divines whose names are almost unknown but whose words continue to resonate with us. They have a ghost presence in our lives, invisible but constantly heard, enriching the language with the ‘civility, learning and eloquence’ of their translation, but nowadays only whispering the sentences into our ears.

Beyond that private communication, they have left few clues. Surviving in one or two English libraries and archives are the instructions produced at the beginning of the work, a couple of drafts of short sections sketched out in the course of it, some fragments of correspondence between one or two of them and a few pages of notes taken at a meeting near the end. Otherwise nothing.

But that virtual anonymity is the power of the book. The translation these men made together can lay claim to be the greatest work in prose ever written in English. That it should be the creation of a committee of people no one has ever heard

of – and who were generally unacknowledged at the time – is the key to its grandeur. It is not the poetry of a single mind, nor the effusion of a singular vision, nor even the product of a single moment, but the child of an entire culture stretching back to the great Jewish poets and storytellers of the Near Eastern Bronze Age. That sense of an entirely embraced and reimagined past is what fuels this book.

The divines of the first decade of seventeenth-century England were alert to the glamour of antiquity, in many ways consciously archaic in phraseology and grammar, meticulous in their scholarship and always looking to the primitive and the essential as the guarantee of truth. Their translation was driven by that idea of a constant present, the feeling that the riches, beauties, failings and sufferings of Jacobean England were part of the same world as the one in which Job, David or the Evangelists walked. Just as Rembrandt, a few years later, without any sense of absurdity or presumption, could portray himself as the Apostle Paul, the turban wrapped tightly around his greying curls, the eyes intense and inquiring, the King James Translators could write their English words as if the passage of 1,600 or 3,000 years made no difference. Their subject was neither ancient nor modern, but both or either. It was the universal text.

The book they created was consciously poised in its rhetoric between vigour and elegance, plainness and power. It is not framed in the language, as one Puritan preacher described it, of ‘fat and strutting bishops, pomp-fed prelates’, nor of Puritan controversy or intellectual display. It aimed to step beyond those categories to embrace the universality of its subject. As a result, it does not suffer from one of the defining faults of the age: a form of anxious and egotistical self-promotion. It exudes, rather, a shared confidence and authority and in that is one of the greatest of all monuments to the suppression of ego.

It is often said that the King James Translators (a word that was capitalised at the time), particularly in the New Testament,

Preface

did little more than copy out the work of William Tyndale, done over eighty years before in the dawn of the Reformation. The truth of their relationship to Tyndale, as will emerge, is complex but the point is surely this: they would have been pleased to acknowledge that they were winnowing the best from the past. They would not have wanted the status of originators or ‘authors’ – a word at which one of their Directors, Lancelot Andrewes, would visibly shudder. They took from Tyndale because Tyndale had done well, not perfectly and not always with an ear for the richness of the language, but with a passion for clarity which the Jacobean scholars shared. What virtue was there in newness when the old was so good?

Of course, the King James Bible did not spring from the soil of Jacobean England as quietly and miraculously as a lily. There were arguments and struggles, exclusions and competitiveness. It is the product of its time and bears the marks of its making. It is a deeply political book. The period was held in the grip of an immense struggle: between the demands for freedom of the individual conscience and the need for order and an imposed inheritance; between monarchy and democracy; between extremism and toleration. Early Jacobean England is suffused with this drama of authority and legitimacy and of the place of the state within that relationship. ‘The reformers’, it has often been said, ‘dethroned the Pope and enthroned the Bible.’ That might have been the case in parts of Protestant Europe, but in England the process was longer, slower, less one-directional and more complex. The authority of the English, Protestant monarch, as head of the Church of England, had taken on wholesale many of the powers which had previously belonged to the pope. The condition of England was defined by those ambiguities. In the years that the translation was being prepared, *Othello*, *Volpone*, *King Lear* and *The Tempest* – all centred on the ambivalences of power, the rights of the individual will, the claims of authority and the question of liberty of conscience – were written and

staged for the first time. The questions that would erupt in the Civil War three decades later were already circling around each other here.

But it is easy to let that historical perspective distort the picture. To see the early seventeenth century through the gauze of the Civil War is to regard it only as a set of origins for the conflict. That is not the quality of the time, nor is the King James Bible any kind of propaganda for an absolutist king. Its subject is majesty, not tyranny, and its political purpose was unifying and enfolding, to elide the kingliness of God with the godliness of kings, to make royal power and divine glory into one indivisible garment which could be wrapped around the nation as a whole. Its grandeur of phrasing and the deep slow music of its rhythms – far more evident here than in any Bible the sixteenth century had produced – were conscious embodiments of regal glory. It is a book written for what James, the self-styled *Rex Pacificus*, and his councillors hoped – a vain hope, soon shipwrecked on vanity, self-indulgence and incompetence – might be an ideal world.



ONE

A poore man now arrived
at the *Land of Promise*

And the LORD magnified Solomon exceedingly in the sight of all Israel, and bestowed vpon him *such* royal maiestie as had not bene on any king before him in Israel.

1 Chronicles 29:25

Few moments in English history have been more hungry for the future, its mercurial possibilities and its hope of richness, than the spring of 1603. At last the old, hesitant, querulous and increasingly unapproachable Queen Elizabeth was dying. Nowadays, her courtiers and advisers spent their lives tiptoeing around her moods and her unpredictability. Lurching from one unaddressed financial crisis to the next, selling monopolies to favourites, she had begun to lose the affection of the country she had nurtured for so long. Elizabeth should have died years before. Most of her great men – Burleigh, Leicester, Walsingham, even the beautiful Earl of Essex, executed after a futile and chaotic rebellion in 1601 – had gone already. She had become a relict of a previous age and her wrinkled, pasteboard virginity now looked more like fruitlessness than purity. Her niggardliness had starved the fountain of patronage on which the workings of the country relied and those mechanisms, unoiled by the necessary

largesse, were creaking. Her exhausted impatience made the process of government itself a labyrinth of tact and indirection.

The country felt younger and more vital than its queen. Cultural conservatives might have bemoaned the death of old values and the corruption of modern morals (largely from Italy, conceived of as a louche and violent place), but these were not the symptoms of decline. England was full of newness and potential: its population burgeoning, its merchant fleets combing the world, London growing like a hothouse plum, the sons of gentlemen crowding as never before into the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, plants and fruits from all over the world arriving in its gardens and on its tables – but the rigid carapace of the Elizabethan court lay like a cast-iron lid above it. The queen's motto was still what it always had been: *Semper eadem*, Always the same. She hadn't moved with the times. So parsimonious had she been in elevating men to the peerage that by the end of her reign there were no more than sixty peers in the nobility of England. Scarcely a gentleman had been knighted by the queen for years.

That drought of honours was a symptom of a kind of paralysis, an indecisive rigidity. None of the great issues of the country had been resolved. Inflation had transformed the economy but the Crown was still drawing rents from its properties that had been set in the 1560s. The relationship between the House of Commons and the queen, for all her wooing and flattery, had become angry, tetchy, full of recrimination. The old war against Spain, which had achieved its great triumph of defeating the Armada in 1588, had dragged on for decades, haemorrhaging money and enjoying little support from the Englishmen whose taxes were paying for it. The London and Bristol merchants wanted only one outcome: an end to war, so that trade could be resumed. Religious differences had been buried by the Elizabethan regime: both Roman Catholics, who wanted England to return to the fold of the Roman Church, and the more extreme,

'hotter' Protestants, the Puritans, who felt that the Reformation in England had never been properly achieved, had been persecuted by the queen and her church, fined, imprisoned and executed. Any questions of change, tolerance or acceptance had not been addressed. Elizabeth had survived by ignoring problems or suppressing them and as a result England was a cauldron which had not been allowed to boil. Later history – even in the seventeenth century itself – portrayed Elizabeth's death as a dimming of the brilliance, the moment at which England swapped a heroic, gallant, Renaissance freshness for something more degenerate, less clean-cut, less noble, more self-serving, less dignified. But that is almost precisely the opposite of what England felt at the time. Elizabeth was passé, decayed. A new king, with wife, children (Anne was pregnant with their sixth child) an heir for goodness' sake, a passionate huntsman, full of vigour, a poet, an intellectual of European standing, a new king, a new reign and a new way of looking at the world; of course the country longed for that. Elizabeth's death held out the prospect of peace with Spain, a new openness to religious toleration, and a resolution of the differences between the established church and both Catholics and Puritans. More than we can perhaps realise now, a change of monarch in an age of personal rule meant not only a change of government and policy, but a change of culture, attitude and belief. A new king meant a new world.

James Stuart was an unlikely hero: ugly, restless, red-haired, pale-skinned, his tongue, it was said, too big for his mouth, impatient, vulgar, clever, nervous. But his virtues, learned in the brutal world of Scottish politics, were equal to the slurs of his contemporaries. More than anything else he wanted and believed in the possibilities of an encompassing peace. He adopted as his motto the words from the Sermon on the Mount, *Beati Pacifici*, Blessed are the Peacemakers, a phrase which, in the aftermath of a European century in which the continent had torn itself

apart in religious war, would appear over and over again on Jacobean chimneypieces and carved into oak testers and overmantels, crammed in alongside the dreamed of, wish-fulfilment figures of Peace and Plenty, Ceres with her overbrimming harvests and luscious breasts, Pax embracing Concordia. The Bible that is named after James, and whose translation was authorised by him, was central to his claim on that ideal.



James was in bed, but not yet asleep, when he learned that he had become King of England. He had been King of Scotland since he was one year old, when his mother Mary, Queen of Scots had been deposed thirty-five years before. He had spent his life in the wings and now, at last, his great scene was about to begin. A rather handsome and deeply indebted English gentleman, Sir Robert Carey, who at different times had been a commander against the Spanish Armada and a court dandy – just the sort of glamorous and rather sexy man to whom James was instinctively drawn – had ridden night and day on his own behalf to bring the news of Elizabeth's death to Scotland. For decades, Carey had been living beyond his means and was desperate for advancement. This was his main chance too. Having fallen off his horse and been kicked in the face en route, he finally reached the palace of Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh on the evening of 26 March 1603, some seventy hours after Queen Elizabeth had died in her palace at Richmond on the Thames. His head was bleeding from his fall.

Several weeks before, as Elizabeth had entered what was clearly her terminal illness, long, moping, energyless silences absorbing her, Carey had arranged for a string of horses to be waiting at inns all along the Great North Road and now he was well ahead of the game. Not until the following day were the proclamations made in Shrewsbury or York, and in Bristol only

the day after that. But the English Privy Council already had their own spies in place at the Scottish court, and were curious to know how James had taken the news. ‘Even, my Lords,’ their reporter, Sir Roger Aston, told them later that week, ‘like a poore man wandering about 40 years in a wilderness and barren soyle, and now arrived at the *Land of Promise*.’

It was the most perfect moment of James’s life. He received Carey in his bedroom. The Englishman knelt before the king and ‘saluted him by his title of *England, Scotland, France and Ireland*. Hee gave me his hand to kisse, and bade me welcome.’ James wanted to know what letters Carey brought with him from the English Council, but Carey had to confess he had none. This was private enterprise, against the wishes of the English Secretary of State, Robert Cecil, and the only sign that Carey had brought from the south was a sapphire ring, which James had once sent to Carey’s sister, Philadelphia, Lady Scroope, with the express purpose that she would return it as soon as she knew that Elizabeth had died.

It was enough. James had come into his own. He rewarded Carey with a place as one of the Grooms of the Bedchamber. Or so he promised; within a few weeks Carey was squeezed out of the position, probably by Cecil, who objected to the vulgarity of Carey’s dash north, perhaps by jealous and ambitious Scots. For them, as much as for James, the kingdom of England, increasingly rich, populous, powerful, well governed and civilised, lay to the south glittering like a jewel, or at least a money pump, a promise of riches after years of making do.

The Scottish crown was one of the weakest in Europe. It had no money and could command no armed strength of its own. England, France and Spain wooed and threatened it in turn. The Scottish magnates plotted and brawled with each other. The culture was murderous and James had no natural allies. The Presbyterian Church, taking its cue from the words of the Apostle Peter (‘We ought to obey God rather than men’)

and of Calvin ('Earthly princes deprive themselves of all authority when they rise up against God . . . We ought rather to spit in their faces than to obey them') considered the king and the monarchy inferior both to the word of God and to those who preached it. In 1596, the firebrand Presbyterian Andrew Melville had told James exactly where he stood: 'I mon tell yow, thair is twa Kings and twa Kingdomes in Scotland. Thair is Chryst Jesus the King, and his Kingdome the Kirk, whase subject King James the Saxt is, and of whase kingdome nocht a king nor a lord nor a heid, bot a member.'

To survive in this net of hostility, James had been forced to compromise and dissemble, to become cunning and to lie. His favourite tag was from Tacitus: 'Those who know not how to dissimulate, know not how to rule.' His face had become sly, his red, tufty moustache hanging down over his lips, his eyes somehow loose in their sockets. He regards his portrait painters with an inward, wary, intellectual look. Out of his mouth he would occasionally shoot harsh, witty, testing jokes. The sight of a drawn sword could make him faint and on his body the glorious gold-threaded doublets and ermine capes looked like fancy-dress; a private, isolated, cunning man disguised as a king. Elizabeth had been painted holding a rainbow, standing astride the map of England, bedecked with the symbols of purity. James in his portraits (he hated being painted) never reached for any mythological significance: he sat or stood red-faced, bad-tempered, irredeemably a man of this world, no distant image of a king but a king whose task, as God's lieutenant, was to resolve and unify the tensions and fractures of his kingdom.

His upbringing had been deeply disturbed. David Rizzio, secretary and lover of Mary, Queen of Scots, was brutally murdered in an adjoining room as she listened to his screams. James was in her womb at the time. His father, the charming Henry Darnley, was murdered by his mother's next lover, the Earl of Bothwell, blown up when lying ill in his Edinburgh house. James

never saw his mother after he was one year old and, although baptised, like her, a Catholic, was then put in the care of a string of terrifying Presbyterian governors, in particular George Buchanan, a towering European intellectual, the tutor of Montaigne, friend of Tycho Brahe, who considered the deposing of wicked kings perfectly legitimate, and whose memory continued to haunt James in adult life. As a boy king, he had been a trophy in the hands of rival noble factions in Scotland, kidnapped, held, threatened and imprisoned. 'I was alane,' he wrote later, 'without fader or moder, brither or sister, king of this realme, and heir apperand of England.'

James retreated from the brutality and anarchy. He became chronically vulnerable to the allure of beautiful, elegant, rather Frenchified men. He loved hunting, excessively, an escape from the realities, at one point killing every deer in the royal park at Falkland in Fife, which had to be restocked from England. It has been calculated that he spent about half his waking life on the hunting field. And he became immensely intellectual, speaking 'Greek before breakfast, Latin before Scots', composing stiff Renaissance poetry, full of a clotted and frustrated emotionality, translating the Psalms, capable on sight of turning any passage of the Bible from Latin to French and then from French to English.

In 1584, when James was eighteen, the French agent Fontenoy sent home a report on this strange, spiky-edged, intellectualised, awkward and oddly idealistic king:

He is wonderfully clever, and for the rest he is full of honourable ambition, and has an excellent opinion of himself. Owing to the terrorism under which he has been brought up, he is timid with the great lords, and seldom ventures to contradict them; yet his special concern is to be thought hardy and a man of courage . . . He speaks, eats, dresses, dances and plays like a boor, and he is no better in the company of women. He is never still for a moment, but walks perpetually up and

down the room, and his gait is sprawling and awkward, his voice is loud and his body is feeble, yet he is not delicate; in a word he is an old young man.

Fontenoy had asked him about the time he spent hunting: 'He told me that, whatever he seemed, he was aware of everything of consequence that was going on. He could afford to spend time in hunting, because when he attended to business he could do more in an hour than others could do in a day.'

Behind the bravado lay weakness. Scotland was no place to be a king. The English throne, infinitely more powerful in relation to the nobility than his own; supported by the structures and doctrines of the church, rather than eroded and undermined by them; rich, potent and admired – all this awaited him like a harbour tantalisingly visible from far out to sea, but, until Elizabeth's death, only to be longed for and lusted after.

Elizabeth taunted him. James had often sent his spies to Whitehall or to Richmond to see how near to death the ageing queen was coming. But the English Council was aware of this too and whenever a curious Scotsman seemed to be watching and attending on the queen more carefully than usual, it was arranged for him to stand waiting in a lobby from where he could see, 'through the hangings, to the queen dancing to a little fiddle'. Over and over again, James would hear reports of her fitness and her vigour.

Meanwhile, she dandled her kingdom and her money in front of his eyes. There were other claimants to the English throne, but none so strong. Both his mother and father carried Tudor genes but Elizabeth would make nothing sure. In 1586, all too vaguely, she had promised to do nothing that would take away from 'any greatness that might be due to him, unless provoked on his part by manifest ingratitude'. She began to send him money, and in the letters that accompanied the cash, Elizabeth allowed herself to speak to James from the enormous and magnificent height of an imperial throne. As she wrote to him in June 1586:

A poore man now arrived at the Land of Promise

Considering that God hath endewed ws with a crown that yeildeth more yerly profite to us, than we understand yours doth to youe, by reason of the dissipation and evill government thereof of long tyme before your birth, we have latelie sent to youe a portion meete for your awin privat use.

The English carefully varied the amount from year to year, sometimes £3,000, sometimes £5,000, so that James would never quite know where he stood. The Scots always called the grant an ‘annuity’ – a payment due every year – and the English ‘a gratuity’, made out of the kindness of their hearts. The English policy had its effect. Although James’s mother was a Catholic, and although he had flirted with the Catholic states in Europe and had made vague, lying promises to English Roman Catholics that he would introduce something like toleration when he acceded to the English throne, he had never done anything to put his chances of succession in jeopardy. He had been bought. By the time of Elizabeth’s death – she died, in the end, ‘mildly like a lamb, easily like a ripe apple from the tree’, so quietly that no one was quite sure of the precise time of her death – James’s mouth was dry with years of panting.

It was a difficult role to play. Although there is no evidence of his affection for a mother he hadn’t seen since he was an infant, James had been forced to acquiesce in her execution in 1587. The unstated but implicit assumption was that he had bargained that acceptance for a recognition of his title to the English throne. The conventional modern view of such an upbringing would be negative: such abuse would be bound to destroy the person. James, for all his strange, unaccommodated behaviour, went precisely the other way. The outcome of his violent, threatened youth was not someone filled with vitriol and vengeance, although James could be foul-mouthed, but what might be called exaggeratedly social behaviour, a longing for acceptance and a desire for a life and a society in which all conflicting demands were reconciled and where all factions felt

at home. At his twenty-first birthday, he had invited all the warring magnates and grandees of Scotland to walk hand in hand through the streets of Edinburgh. It was a ritual, a pantomime of the good society which lasted scarcely longer than the birthday itself; Scotland was not suited to amity. But England was different and for James it must have seemed that at last, that dream of coherence would become a reality.



The reign began with a month-long fiesta during which James was introduced to England and England to James. In London, the Secretary of State, little shrunken Robert Cecil, his back humped like a lute, his wry neck holding his head to one side, his twisted foot giving him an awkward stance, read out the proclamation of the new king at four in the morning in the Tudor palace at Richmond, at 10 a.m. at the ramshackle royal palace in Whitehall, then in great state at various places in the City of London. Cecil, subtle, secretive, immensely courteous and prodigiously hard-working, was at the heart of English government, as his father, Lord Burghley, had been before him. Both were royal servants intent on continuity and on the coherence of the state. They were merciless in the destruction of their enemies, against whom they deployed an array of spies, charm and money. Only when Robert Cecil died did the world discover the reality. He had sunk himself into almost irretrievable debt. He had plotted and misinformed against everyone. Through the impartiality of his courtesy and the ubiquity of his deceit, he had maintained his unrivalled position of influence. As his father had done with Elizabeth before her accession, Cecil had been in secret correspondence with James, via an intermediary, for two years.

In letter after letter, Cecil flattered and cajoled him, portrayed England as a place of civility and charm, a featherbed

into which James could at last relax after all the stony travails of his Scottish youth. The warm and civilised care which Cecil lavished on the future king represented to James everything he hoped of England. And, of course, the letters portrayed Cecil himself as the indispensable gatekeeper who could usher James into the promised land. The Earl of Essex, before his disastrous rebellion and death in 1601, had been playing the same role. Once Essex was out of the way, Cecil had slid smoothly into position and now at last, with the queen dead, he could bring the secret arrangements to conclusion: he dispatched the English Privy Council's envoys to Scotland. They invited James 'to repair into England with all speed'.

'Good news makes good horsemen', and before James began his long progress south, a stream of interested Englishmen made their way to Holyrood, anxious to mould and influence the reign from its very beginning. Lewis Pickering, a Puritan gentleman from Northamptonshire, soon to be involved in the widespread manoeuvrings for the reform of the English Church, was one of the first to be admitted to James's presence. Would the king look more kindly than Elizabeth on the need to banish all papist practices from the English Church? Would the Reformation in England at last be made complete by the Calvinist king? Political to his core, James would not dream of giving more than a gracious answer. Dr Thomas Neville, envoy from the Archbishop of Canterbury, followed him. Neville was one of the most passionate opponents of extreme Puritanism, and of everything Pickering represented. Would the king stand firm for the House of Bishops against all the demands of the Presbyterian clergy in England? Would he support the status quo? Surely the last thing he wanted was to turn the English Church into anything resembling the church of John Knox and George Buchanan? Again, no answer. Others clustered in their sycophancy. Sir Oliver Cromwell, uncle of the regicide, came to pay his respects. 'One saith hee will serve him by daie,' the

world-weary wit and courtier Sir John Harington wrote to a friend, 'another by night. The women are for servynge him both day and nighte.'

James requested cash from the Privy Council and it arrived by the coachload. They sent £5,000 in gold and £1,000 in silver. Jewellery for his Danish Queen Anne arrived from London (although not the Crown Jewels which were not allowed out of the country) as well as a selection of Elizabeth's hundreds of garnet- and pearl-encrusted dresses. Six geldings and a coach with four horses were dispatched to bring the king into England. On 5 April 1603, leaving his wife and children to follow him, James left Edinburgh for a journey through his new kingdom. It lasted over a month, spreading on through the beautiful spring weather into May. Nobility, gentlemen and chancers from north and south of the border accompanied him. It was a cavalcade. Most rode on horses. The wife of the French Ambassador was carried to London in 'a chair with slings', eight porters hired for the task, four to carry, four to relieve them.

The English turned out in their thousands to see the spectacle. James may have been unaware that the Privy Council had instructed them to do so and 'if any shall be found disobedient, negligent or remisse therein, these are to let them know, that they are to sustaine such condigne punishment as their offense in that behalfe deserveth'. The gaiety had a whip at its back and the glittering pageant was an instrument of authority.

In Berwick-on-Tweed, all the guns of the border fortress town were fired at once. It was to be for the last time. The newly unified country needed no internal border fortresses and money could be saved if the garrison was dispersed. James was invited to fire one cannon himself. In Newcastle all prisoners were released except those in prison for 'treason, murther and papistrie'. All those gaoled for debt had those debts paid off. James was hosing the money around him. In York a conduit ran all day with white wine and claret. At Worksop, the king was entertained to

‘excellent, soule-ravishing musique’ by the Earl of Shrewsbury, who had hurried from Whitehall to meet him there.

James was nothing but bonhomie. The previously violent and lawless Scottish borders were to become, he announced, the ‘very heart of the Country’ in the new united empire of Great Britain, a phrase in use since the 1540s when Henry VIII and Edward VI had been anxious to unite England and Scotland, but now given a whole new Jacobean impetus. James had ordered new signets in which the rose and the thistle were to be intertwined. Unity and togetherness was his dream. An ensign for shipping was to be designed in which the Scottish saltire of St Andrew and the English cross of St George were to float side by side so that neither should have precedence over the other. There was to be a single currency in which the 20-shilling gold piece was to be called ‘The Unite’, with ‘Our picture’ on one side and ‘Our Armes Crowned’ on the other, emblazoned with the Latin motto *Faciam eos in gentem unam*, I shall make them into one nation. Here, in a practical and symbolic programme, the dream of authority and wholeness was, in James’s vision at least, to become reality.

The new king would soon discover, however, that seventeenth-century Englishmen had about as much love for union, whether fiscal or political, as their modern descendants. The dream of unity – an abstract, intellectualised, Scottish and hence European ideal of political togetherness – would within a year fall foul of an English conservatism which valued its own hard-won freedoms far above any high-falutin’ ideas of political unity. England was England, the *rosbifs* dominated parliament, civilisation stopped at the Cheviots and the English Channel and ever, alas, would it remain so.

For the time being, life was a holiday. Largesse had been pouring in an unending fountain from James’s hand. He had, in places, literally showered the streets with gold coins. Teams of the gentry were queueing up to be knighted, 237 of them in the

first six weeks of the reign, 906 in the first four months, a sudden gush from the Fount of Honour, which under Elizabeth's last years had run virtually dry.

Then, on 21 April, as the pageant arrived at Newark in Lincolnshire, James made his first mistake. It was a bad one.

In this Towne, and in the Court, was taken a cut-purse doing the deed; and being a base pilfering theefe, yet was a Gentleman-like in the outside. This fellow had good store of coyne found about him; and upon examination confessed that he had from Barwick to that place plaid the cut-purse in the Court . . . His Majestie hearing of this nimming gallant directed a warrant presently to the Recorder of New-warke, to have him hanged, which was accordingly executed.

What can have possessed James? Perhaps he was rattled by the presence of a thief in the midst of all this springtime hope and optimism? Maybe he assumed that the English king, so much more powerful than the Scottish, could from time to time behave with autocratic authority? Maybe, in a complex and troubled personality, it was simply a blip, an aberration? He could certainly behave very oddly at times. (Later in his reign, travelling back to Scotland, he dismounted at the border between the two countries and lay down across it to demonstrate to his courtiers how two kingdoms could exist in one person.) Whatever the cause, here in Newark he made the wrong decision.

Summary execution was not done in England, nor had it been for centuries. The government habitually tortured and executed people and displayed their heads (hard-boiled, so that the skin went black and had some resistance to the weather) on spikes at the south end of London Bridge, but none of this was done without going through the proper procedures. The Privy Council alone could authorise torture and execution. James's summary justice made all the talk of peacemaking and constitutional kingship look hollow. The courtiers were appalled. 'I heare our new Kinge hath hanged one man before he was tryed,' Sir John

Harington wrote. 'Tis strangely done; now if the wynde bloweth thus, why not a man be tryed before he hath offended?' A doubt was sown that James did not really comprehend the promised land in which he had arrived. Was the Scottish king suddenly out of his depth in the more evolved world of English politics? Was he likely to override or ignore the long established rule of the common law, of which the English were deeply proud? Harington would play it carefully. 'I wyll keepe companie with my oves and boves, and go to Bathe and drinke sacke.' Or so he told his friends; in fact, he had sent James an elaborate and expensive astrological lantern by which the king could tell his fortune, and composed elegant, supplicatory letters to his new sovereign. Nothing was entirely as it seemed.

The thief dead, the show went on. James appeared one day as Robin Hood, 'his clothes as green as the grass he trod on'. At Exton in Rutland he hunted 'live hares in baskets'. Outside Stamford, visible from miles away, 'an hundred high men, that seemed like the *Patagones*, huge long fellows of twelve and fourteene feet high, that are reported to live on the Mayne of Brasil, neere to the Streights of Megallane' turned out to be 'a company of poore honest suitors, all going upon high stilts'. Outside Huntingdon, a crowd on their knees begged James to reopen some common land which had been enclosed and denied to them. The king ignored the request. Another crowd from Godmanchester greeted him with seventy ploughs, drawn by seventy plough-teams, but that too was just a show, another means, however oblique, of asking for money.

This was not the serious business, not the power-playing which would become more intense and more real once the cavalcade reached London. For now it was play-acting. For a few days, the king and the itinerant court stayed at Hinchinbrooke Abbey outside Huntingdon. It was the house of Sir Oliver Cromwell, MP, himself a loyal monarchist, drainer of the Fens, and subscriber to the planting and cultivating of Virginia.

Cromwell put on a spectacular show for the new king and for the crowds, providing 'bread and beefe for the poorest', meat and wine 'and those not riffe-ruffe, but ever the best of the kinde' for the gentry. Cromwell gave the king a gold cup, 'some goodly horses', a pack of 'flete and deep-mouthed houndes' as well as 'divers hawkes of excellent winge'. Everything was calculated to make England look like an Arcadia of riches, and James appeared to believe the propaganda.

England was salivating over James, submissive and obsequious in turns, in a way that is so unabashed that it strikes us as odd. But this too requires an act of the imagination. Submissiveness and obsequiousness were signals of the social order at work. Social differences between men were not an unfortunate result of economics or power politics, nor a distortion of how things ought to be but a sign that society was well ordered. Life, happily, was arranged on a slope as steeply pitched as a church spire. What looks to us now like the most unctuous kind of self-abasement was symbolic of civilisation. A man making a request to his superior happily knelt before him, as a straightforward sign of submission. Plaintiffs knelt in court, children to their fathers, MPs and bishops when addressing the king. When John Donne hoped he might become Dean of St Paul's Cathedral in London, a position in the gift of George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, the king's favourite, Donne wrote to him:

All that I mean in usinge thys boldnes, of puttinge myselfe into your Lordship's presence by thys ragge of paper, ys to tell your Lordship that I ly in a corner, as a clodd of clay, attendinge what kinde of vessell yt shall please you to make of Your Lordship's humblest and thankfullest and devotedst servant.

The 'poore worme' who wrote this letter was no pitiable youth; Donne was almost fifty and probably accompanied the letter with a bribe.

There was biblical sanction for all of this. Paul in his Epistle to the Romans, a favourite text for Jacobean England, says quite straightforwardly: 'Let every soule bee subject vnto the higher powers: For there is no power but of God. The powers that be are ordeined of God. Whosoeuer therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist, shall receiue to themselues damnation.'

The condition in Eden had been one of obedience; a steeply raked social structure was ordained by God; and so crawling to the great could be holy in England too.

The climax of James's journey into his new kingdom came on 3 May when he arrived at the enormous, multi-winged, many-towered palace of Theobalds in Hertfordshire. This was no royal residence, although Elizabeth had often treated the house as if she owned it. Theobalds in fact belonged to Robert Cecil. James, who had scarcely before been outside Scotland, was overwhelmed by the riches of England and the welcome of its people. Cushioned by the grande luxe of Theobalds – the nearest comparison is a great nineteenth-century hotel, or a liner: the *Titanic* had several public rooms decorated in a wildly overblown Jacobean style – all the gratitude he had felt to Cecil during their secret correspondence, he now poured out to the nation as a whole: 'a people so loving, so dutifull, and so deere unto us, may know and feele that we are as desirous to make them happy by our Justice and grace towards them in all reasonable things, as they have been redy to increase our comfort and contentment in yeelding their loyalty and obedience'. Monopolists were to be obliged to give up their monopolies, creditors to pay their debts, lawyers to reduce their fees. Heaven was about to descend on England.

This proclamation was made from Theobalds, where Cecil had not stinted. The building, which was confiscated by parliament after the Civil War, sold off for its raw materials and demolished in about 1650, was everything the king could

have dreamed of. It was enormous, an English Chambord, with five courtyards, three storeys high, stretched along a front a quarter of a mile long. The walls seemed to consist almost entirely of vast glazed surfaces. Golden lions holding golden vanes stood on the peak of one tower after another. James had been exposed to modern architecture – the palace at Falkland was a Renaissance building – but he would never have seen richness on such a scale.

Little, crumpled Robert Cecil, ‘my elf, my beagle, my pygmy’, as James would part affectionately, part humiliatingly call him (Elizabeth had used the same tease-taunts), with his pale, almond-shaped face, his stooped figure, his evaluating eyes, guided the king around the stupendous palace: the hall decorated with the signs of the Zodiac, where the stars shone at night and which a mechanical sun traversed by day; another hall containing a painted map of England showing all the cities, towns and villages, as well as ‘the armorial bearings and domains of every esquire, lord, knight and noble who possess lands and retainers to whatever extent’. There was an open loggia in which the whole history of England was painted on the walls. In the Long Gallery were portraits of all the great men there had ever been. There were pleasure gardens. There were pictures of all the cities of Christendom. Life can never have seemed so rich. Cecil loved toys and rarities of all kinds, from tortoise-shaped clocks to the ‘nests of little boxes of China’ and the ‘cabinet of china gilt all over’ which were among his possessions at his death. He paid for lion cubs to be trained up in the Tower of London as pets for the king. He had a tame parrot which drank red wine from Bordeaux and walked up and down his dinner table making ‘his choice of meat’. After taking its fill, the bird used to sit ‘in a gentlewoman’s ruff all day’.



The troubled and difficult soul of James Stuart, for so long exposed to parsimony, betrayal and violence in his native Scotland, had arrived in a world of marvels, as if England was a cabinet of rarities to which he had at last been given the key. He immediately elevated Robert Cecil to the peerage (and the following year made him Earl of Salisbury) the first of the fifty-six baronies, nineteen viscountcies, thirty-two earldoms, one marquise and three dukedoms which James scattered like sequins across the country. The bridegroom was in the full and expansive flush of his honeymoon (James's own comparison) and England, the heiress he had married, was happy for the moment to walk alongside him, glowing with the riches she had brought him.