

## *THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY*

The 17th century was a time of enormous change in England. In 1603 the last **Tudor monarch Elizabeth I** died and the throne went to her Stuart cousin, the Scottish King James VI who became **James I of England**.

James was an autocrat who believed strongly in the Divine Right of Kings. He believed that God had placed him on the throne as God's lieutenant on earth.

**Religious strife** - During the early part of the century there was a growing religious division in people. The Anglican (official) Church was the middle way. On one side stood the illegal Roman Catholic Church, and on the other stood the growing Puritan movement.

**Puritans** were even more conservative in their forms of worship than were the Anglicans. They were convinced that all were equal in the sight of God, and because of this, kings were not strictly necessary

The popularity and strength of the Puritan movement grew throughout the 1630-40s until in 1642 Civil War broke out between the Puritans, who were supported by and actually controlled Parliament, and the Court, or Royal Party. This religious strife is often mirrored in the poetry of the pre-war years.

**Civil War** - When the war broke out, James's son Charles I was king. Charles had inherited his father's ideas of kingship, but not his strength. He also failed to realize the growing strength of the merchant/middle class. The war went on until 1649 when Charles was captured by the Parliamentary forces and in a revolutionary move, beheaded. His son, Charles II became king but didn't come to the throne until 1660.

Instead **Oliver Cromwell**, who had been head of the Parliamentarian Army, became the leader of England. England entered what is known as the Commonwealth Period.

**Commonwealth** - During this rather austere period of Puritan rule, theaters were closed and literature fell somewhat into decline. Poetry was only seen as good when it talked about God or holy stories, and narratives were seen as nothing more than sinful lies. The greatest art form during this period is the essay.

**Restoration** - In 1660, 2 years after Cromwell's death, the Parliament and the people of England decided that they wanted their monarchy back and **Charles II** was asked to come and take the throne. He did and there was a great creative output after the years of grim Puritan rule. But Charles remained childless and his apparent heir, his brother James, was a Catholic. According to English law, Catholics could not hold public office.



**Charles** died in 1685 and his brother did succeed him as **James II**. At the time he was a widower with 2 adult, Protestant daughters. But he married a young Catholic princess from Spain and had an infant son. People did not want a Catholic king with a Catholic heir. James, fearing for his life, fled the country. The throne was offered to his daughter.

**Left:** Charles II

**Right:** Wax figure of Charles, made after his death.



**Glorious Revolution** - This is what the people called it in 1688 when James left and his Protestant daughter Mary took the throne as Mary II with her husband and first cousin William III. They have been the only joint rulers in British history. Some felt that James was the true and rightful king, and people took sides. This split is reflected in the literature for the rest of the century.

During the 17th century, some literary forms died out and new ones sprang up. The most notable of these were in the area of popular literature. When the Puritans rose against the authoritarian government of Charles I in 1641, they broke the long-held power of censorship of the Bishop of London. Immediately a flood of letters, newspapers and writings of all kinds appeared throughout England. A habit of reading about and discussing public affairs was established. So the Restoration brought the birth of both journalism and the two-party system, each reflecting the development of something like modern "public opinion". Also, though prose narrative had been practiced for a long time in the form of tales and romances, the Restoration saw the first growth of what would later become the novel. These developments could not have happened without the existence of a reading audience with an interest in general ideas and social observation. This wider audience was not necessarily familiar with classical literary traditions but was able to follow writings in plain and commonsense English.