James I
(1566–1625)
King of England (and Scotland), who brought the British Isles peace, provided dynastic security, and brought order to the English church, but whose successes were overshadowed by scandal and constitutional clashes.

"Instead of approaching the reign with the idea that James was a Bad King, it is more fruitful to see him as an exceptional man whose qualities fell sadly short of their highest achievement."

S. J. Houston

Queen Elizabeth, speaking on the subject of marriage, prayed that God would send the royal line an heir "that may be a fit governor, and per adventure more beneficial to the realm than such offspring as may come of me." When her Scottish cousin succeeded in 1603, most Englishmen would have acknowledged that Elizabeth's prayer had been answered. If ever there was a man who should have been prepared to ascend the throne of England, it was James VI, king of Scotland for all but the first of his 37 years.

James was the only child of Mary, Queen of Scots and her cousin Henry Stewart, Lord Darnley. Though both were tall and handsome and their veins flowed with Tudor blood, they were not a loving couple. If an unborn child can be said to suffer from psychological trauma, James would have been a candidate; three months before his birth, his mother felt the steel blade of a knife held against her belly as she was forced to watch the barbaric stabbing-murder of her secretary, David Rizzio.

Mary had reason to be afraid. Because her death—and that of her unborn son—would have strengthened her husband's claim to the English

Contributed by Robert Blackey, Professor of History, California State University, San Bernardino, California
I was a powerful and a divisive force, and although the country was officially Protestant, many Scots were still Catholic.

In spite of having these handicaps as his inheritance, James would do surprisingly well during his more than three decades as king of Scotland—even making the monarchy stronger—but the royal path he would follow was never carpeted in red. The first regent who was to govern until the child-king came of age was assassinated in 1570. The next occupied the position for a year before being mortally wounded during a civil insurrection; little James, stunned, witnessed the actual dying. A third regent died of natural causes the following year, while the fourth, and last, survived for a decade before being executed for his earlier complicity in Darnley’s death.

By the start of the final regency, James was almost seven years old. Emotional stability was a stranger to him, and he had no memories of his parents. Those who had cared for him included an alcoholic wet nurse and a harsh senior tutor who nonetheless enlightened the bright young boy in the classics, science, languages, and religious studies.

The young king, on the basis of the good looks of Mary and Darnley, might have been handsome. James, however, had sad, watery, and droopy blue eyes; dark hair; a long fleshy nose; and thin lips that dropped at the corners. Of average height with broad shoulders, he possessed a pear-shaped body that was supported by spindly, bent legs. While he played some golf, the royal game of Scotland, he mostly preferred hunting because the powerful legs of his steed transformed him into a gallant centaur. But on the ground, he eventually had to depend on the physical support of courtiers. (He tried strengthening his legs by bathing them in the bellies of freshly killed stags and bucks, but to no avail.) A hostile contemporary observed that when James ate an unpalatable dish, he would make a distasteful, splashing noise, like a Great Dane, dribbling liquids into his beard because his tongue was too big for his mouth.

This undistinguished, sometimes comical-looking man grew up in a loveless environment, and the need to love and be loved was apparently strong in him. When James was 13, an older and elegant French cousin arrived in Scotland, and the adolescent king fell in love; this, perhaps, set a pattern whereby he would link sexual love with men. In other matters, James gained political acumen; he was a quick study and had a retentive memory. But to this portrait must be added another brush stroke. As an adult, and especially in the last decade or so...
or his life, James apparently suffered from porphyria, a disease he inherited from his mother and which was eventually passed along to the Hanoverians where it would be responsible for the symptoms identified with the madness of George III. Porphyria means "purple urine" and refers to the most obvious sign of the ailment which results from a pigment discoloration in the blood. The disease weakened and incapacitated James for periods of time, and it made him irritable and melancholy. According to some medical historians, James's need for close friends and favorites on whom he could depend and to whom he could delegate state business may have been explained more by his frequent bouts with porphyria than on deficiencies of character. In any case, these diverse ingredients formed his character, and the result was a man who was a curious collage of self-confidence and self-indulgence housed in a less-than-glorious frame.

**James Marries Young Anne of Denmark**

The late 16th century was a time when Europeans were making increasing contacts with the world around them, but James remained an insular man. He did, however, have one overseas adventure, and a romantic one at that: in 1589, he traveled to Norway to rescue his wife-to-be, the 14-year-old Anne of Denmark, from the frozen grip of ice and snow that had stalled her journey to Scotland. Golden-haired, white-skinned, tall, slender and attractive, she was waiting for her prince to come into the Oslo palace lumbered James, "boots and all." Though married a few days later, James's love for Anne quickly faded. Drifting apart, though not before seven children were born, they eventually stopped living together. When Anne died in 1619, James did not even attend her funeral.

Throughout his rule in Scotland James VI had to mediate between and contest with religious groups as well as with noble factions. Ultimately he succeeded in bringing about a new respect for law and order, mostly by securing the cooperation of the nobility. He also had to keep foreign influences at bay while always retaining Queen Elizabeth's goodwill so as not to jeopardize his succession. And James had to deal with both the real threat of occasional attacks on his life and the perceived threat of spiritual violence from the witches he—and most of society—believed existed. All this fed his paranoia, and James came to see himself as "an experienced king needing no lessons."

He also came to believe that the sovereign had an individual right, derived from God, to his throne. This was a hereditary right, as James wrote in a 1598 treatise, *Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, and even a tyrannical king had inalienable rights over his people because he had been sent by God. In Scotland, this doctrine was pronounced, not practiced, but James would soon bring it with him to England. And once he crossed Hadrian's Wall, the doctrine was regularly paraded before the people's representatives in Parliament and the judges at the bar:

> The state on monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth; for kings are not only God's lieutenants upon earth and sit upon God's throne, but even by God himself they are called gods... [1610].

While the people of two nations waited for an old queen to die, Robert Cecil, Elizabeth's chief minister, secretly corresponded with James for two years and tried to instruct the heir apparent in the art of becoming king of England. (Unfortunately, the smooth succession that followed served only to reinforce James's theories on divine right.) Several days after Elizabeth died, King James VI of Scotland, now England's King James I, began a journey that was, as Dr. Samuel Johnson wrote in the 18th century while reflecting on England's everpresent sense of self-importance, "the noblest prospect which a Scotchman ever sees... the high road that leads him to England."

James I was on that high road for a month before reaching London. The journey itself witnessed other events which seemed to presage future problems. The king, for example, knighted more than 300 men who had come to meet him along the way. (In fact, in his first four months as king, James knighted more men than Elizabeth had during her entire 45-year reign—often for a fee to help bolster perennially weak royal finances.) James also ordered a thief, brought before him in one town, to be hanged at once without a trial; however certain the guilt, such summary justice was not according to English law. And James adopted the title "King of Great Britain" without Parliament's consent; he simply expected that his own perception of himself would be accepted without a challenge. He quickly learned otherwise.

For a people who prized tradition and had been nurtured on Crown worship, the English found James something of an anomaly. Although he clearly espoused the divinity of kingship, he cared little for ceremony or cheering crowds. Used to the glory of Elizabeth, the people were at first puzzled, then put off. Where Elizabeth wore clothes meant to dazzle, James wore extra-thick,
quilted jackets (to thwart the daggers of would-be assassins) and plumed, fully-stuffed breeches. "He never [even] washed his hands," wrote a disgruntled contemporary, "only rubbed his finger ends slightly with the wet end of a napkin." James may have come to occupy center stage, but he was a mere crown-wearing Everyman to Elizabeth's Gloriana.

In England, James was confronted with a host of issues and problems that tested both his mettle and his stamina, and central to many of those problems was the state of royal finances. Prices had risen about 50% during Elizabeth's reign, and the queen had left a large debt. Political corruption was growing, and James aggravated the situation by his extravagant and generous nature, a nature that would be exploited by friends and favorites. Every year he incurred a deficit, and within five years the royal debt was six times larger than the one he had inherited.

The King Struggles with Parliament

As a result James was compelled to look to Parliament for assistance. When he met his first Parliament in 1604, the members informed him that they had exercised restraint in their resistance to Elizabeth out of respect for her age, but now they expected more cooperation. James, however, used to a subservient Scottish Parliament, had difficulty in grasping just how sophisticated the English Parliament was becoming and how determined the M.P.'s were to increase their participation in government. An initial clash over a disputed election resulted in the House of Commons drawing up The Form of Apology and Satisfaction in which, respectfully and apologetically, they informed the king that their privileges were held by right, not by his good graces. Although this difference in understanding would never be formally resolved during James's reign, the Commons slowly, cut away the monarch's control.

Still, James had always recognized that the divine right origin of his power did not mean that those powers were absolute. He readily acknowledged that he could not make laws or collect taxes without the consent of Parliament. Thus the struggle between James and Parliament was over the extent of his lawful powers, that is, his prerogatives, relative to statute law and common law. James, unfortunately, cheapened his prerogative when, for example, he agreed to consider the Great Contract (1610), a proposal to yield some of his prerogatives in exchange for an annual parliamentary grant; nothing came of this except the growth of mutual mistrust. And he weakened the independence of the judicial system by bullying judges. This conflict would continue, with growing intensity, into the next reign as perceived government and royal abuses along with attempts at reform resulted in demands for constitutional change.

James had some success in confronting religious issues and in achieving consensus, perhaps more fully than Queen Elizabeth and certainly more so than his succeeding son, Charles I. A reasonably tolerant man who had no wish to preside over an ideologically polarized country, he told Robert Cecil that he did not wish that "the blood of any man shall be shed for diversity of opinions in religion." This did not, however, prevent James from supporting the official church, and his actions sometimes made life difficult for Puritans and Catholics, whose support he had initially sought in securing his peaceful accession to the English throne.

In response to a Puritan petition to reform the Church of England, presented to him on his journey from Scotland, James, to the dismay of his bishops, sponsored the Hampton Court Conference of 1604. Presiding, Solomon-like, he decided some matters in favor of the bishops, some in favor of the Puritans. But afterwards James lost interest, and he allowed the bishops to dominate the commissions. As a result, measures favoring the established church, such as revisions in the Book of the Common Prayer and authorization for a new translation of the Bible, were passed, while Puritan-inspired proposals failed. Since he allowed the Puritans considerable latitude, however, Puritan religious agitation was never a serious problem in his reign.

Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot

If James, a product of Scottish Presbyterianism, was a disappointment to the Puritans, this son of the martyred Mary, Queen of Scots proved equally disappointing to English Catholics. Not only did James fail to act on his promise of greater toleration, but the peace concluded between England and Spain in 1604 robbed English Catholics of protection and hope. Frustrated by the events, a small but well-placed band of them plotted to blow up the king and his Parliament on November 5, 1605. The explosion would be a signal for general rebellion, and out of the chaos the Catholics would emerge to restore their faith. But word of the notorious Gunpowder Plot reached the government, and palace guards found Guy Fawkes, a Catholic soldier of fortune, patiently awaiting the appointed hour to ignite the barrels of explosives. Fawkes and his fellow conspirators were tried and executed for
JAMES I

This once-successful ruler of Scotland courted failure when he ascended his new throne in 1603. He allowed himself to be flattered by the verbal puffy of obsequious courtiers; he expected too much from others, but never enough from himself. Nevertheless, he sought a middle ground in England and peace abroad—which benefitted English trade and the founding of the colonies in America. If he did not achieve everything he hoped, the structure of government and court he left behind was reasonably sound and stable. To be sure, his fiscal policies aggravated already difficult economic times for the crown, but he defused problems with the church and the state. And although he passed along to his son a throne and a kingdom that had serious problems, these were surely not very much worse than those he had inherited from Elizabeth.

James was a man who is easily criticized. The wise and compassionate observer, however, goes beyond the superficial caricature to see the many dimensions of the whole man who, in 1620, advised his son: "Look not to find the softness of a down pillow in a crown, but remember that it is a thorny piece of stuff and full of continual cares."

SOURCES:

FURTHER READING:

Throughout his reign, James kept male favorites close at hand. After Cecil died, in 1612, these favorites relieved him of many of the administrative burdens of monarchy. Unfortunately, they had little else to recommend them, and their growing influence in the second half of the reign gave James and his court an unsavory reputation. James's most important and long-lasting favorite was George Villiers, later the duke of Buckingham (and the first man outside the royal family to be made a duke since the War of the Roses). James may have referred to this handsome, charming, and even dashing young man as his "sweet child and wife," but Buckingham was no lightweight; he immersed himself in politics and, with his immense energy and his undertaking of tasks the king assigned him, he got things done. The problem was that not all his work was for the good. It was he, for example, who accompanied the son and heir Prince Charles to Spain, in 1623, to push a Spanish marriage. But when this failed, Buckingham turned against Spain and toward a war that, by the next reign, would be disastrous for the English monarchy. An ailing King James, uncommitted to war, lurched into it just the same.

In early March 1625, James fell ill while on a hunting trip. His condition deteriorated quickly and he collapsed as a result of what may have been a stroke. Left speechless and severely weakened by dysentery, robbed of his strength and dignity, James died on March 27. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, in the Chapel of Henry VII; thus have the founders of England's first two dynasties of modern times come to share a common resting place.