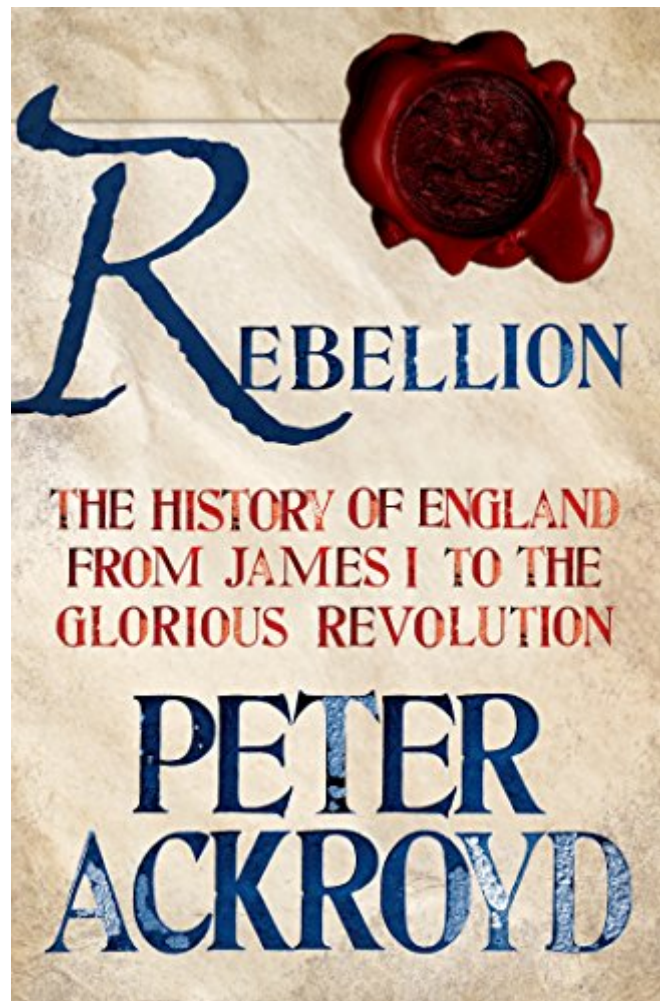


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Rebellion: The History Of England From James I To The Glorious Revolution



Synopsis

Peter Ackroyd has been praised as one of the greatest living chroniclers of Britain and its people. In *Rebellion*, he continues his dazzling account of the history of England, beginning with the progress south of the Scottish king, James VI, who on the death of Elizabeth I became the first Stuart king of England, and ending with the deposition and flight into exile of his grandson, James II. The Stuart monarchy brought together the two nations of England and Scotland into one realm, albeit a realm still marked by political divisions that echo to this day. More importantly, perhaps, the Stuart era was marked by the cruel depredations of civil war, and the killing of a king. Shrewd and opinionated, James I was eloquent on matters as diverse as theology, witchcraft, and the abuses of tobacco, but his attitude to the English parliament sowed the seeds of the division that would split the country during the reign of his hapless heir, Charles I. Ackroyd offers a brilliant, warts-and-all portrayal of Charles's nemesis, Oliver Cromwell, Parliament's great military leader and England's only dictator, who began his career as a political liberator but ended it as much of a despot as "that man of blood," the king he executed. England's turbulent seventeenth century is vividly laid out before us, but so too is the cultural and social life of the period, notable for its extraordinarily rich literature, including Shakespeare's late masterpieces, Jacobean tragedy, the poetry of John Donne and Milton and Thomas Hobbes's great philosophical treatise, *Leviathan*. In addition to its account of England's royalty, *Rebellion* also gives us a very real sense of the lives of ordinary English men and women, lived out against a backdrop of constant disruption and uncertainty.

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Customer Reviews

Atmospherics is what Peter Ackroyd does best. And he does it so well. In all his histories but especially in *Rebellion*, Ackroyd paints a vivid portrait that manages to come alive with the sights, smells and sounds of the period, in this book *Jacobean England*. How's this for verisimilitude: Ackroyd recounts the famous diarist of the period Samuel Pepys sitting down to a dinner of marrow bones and a leg of mutton, a loin of veal and a dish of fowl together with two dozen larks. Offered a serving of fish, Ackroyd tells us that Pepys declined and recorded later in his diary that the sturgeon seemed to be "creeping" with "many little worms, which I suppose was through the staleness of the pickle." *Rebellion* is the latest installment in the author's multi-volume chronicle of Great Britain and it's a big, bouncy slice of British history. He is constantly peppering this part of the massive chronicle with smallish, memorable details such as the description by a member of court of the newly enthroned James I as being someone who was a "robust" and "fluent conversationalist" but also a king who seemed to be "forever fiddling" with his codpiece. From the death of Elizabeth I in 1603 and ascension of James I to the removal of his grandson James II in 1688 the book gives us the story of the House of Stuart. James I was the son of Mary Queen of Scots and as the monarch to usher Britain into the 17th century, James unified England and Scotland, no small achievement. The century was in many ways a prosperous one for Britain. It was also fractious and turbulent. The Stuart century saw the execution of a king, Cromwell's rise and fall and the bloody civil war that became the blot on the dictator's legacy.

The turbulent 17th century in England required a strong king and a leader of men. The four descendants of Mary Queen of Scots proved to have none of that in them. It is ironic that Mary lost her head to Elizabeth, but her son became king after Elizabeth's death. James I was not a Hollywood image of a king. He was a man prone to slobbering, and "playing with his codpiece". Coming from Scotland, and the only child of Mary Queen of Scots, he brought much of that baggage with him, and with all four of these monarchs, he fought continuously for money that was not readily offered for his fine tastes. The one thing he is most remembered for was the creation of the King James Bible. That in itself is a most interesting story, and the author could have presented much

more information on this. His son Charles assumed the throne on the death of his father. Charles was a man of stubborn will, who thought way too much of himself, and foolishly aligned his throne with people not at all popular, such as the Duke of Buckingham. He had a running battle with a Parliament that increasingly sought to strip him of real power. It was so bad that Charles dissolved Parliament in 1629 for a long eleven years. It was only in April of 1640 that it was again summoned because the king needed money and the reception to this was not friendly. There was also great religious conflicts at this time. The dour Presbyterian Scots demanded no toleration of Catholicism and no acceptance of the more formal Church of England which infuriated Charles. To shorten the story, royalists and backers of parliament gathered armies. Charles I eventually was defeated and at the end of January 1649, his head was chopped off.

Rebellion, which is evidently (I haven't read the previous volumes) the third book in a history of England, covers not much more than a century. But it was a very important century of English history, spanned by the rules of two Jameses, two Charleses, two revolutions (one normal, one glorious), and two Cromwells. In the process Parliament firmly took a dominant position over the monarch and England finally came to grip with Protestant dissent. It was a period during which the last heretic was burned in England, the Thirty Years War took place on the Continent, Shakespeare wrote many of his plays, the First and Second Bishop's Wars were fought in Scotland, the Star Chamber was abolished, publication of pamphlets and tracts exploded, English soldiers put on red coats, coffee and tea hit the scene, and Whig and Tory entered the parlance of the time. It is a period defined by the struggle between Parliament and King. The King is forever dissolving or proroguing Parliament, and Parliament is forever denying the King funds and chastising him, and being chastised in turn. We also see the beginnings of modern politics, with contested elections and parties. The tension between military and legislature during the Protectorate presages much of 20th Century history in many countries. The English Civil War was in part but not entirely a religious conflict, in part but not entirely a class conflict, and in part but not entirely a interregional conflict. The idea that all power springs from the people appears, and England briefly has a written constitution. A larger portion of the population perished than in WWI. I remain somewhat conflicted as to Ackroyd's treatment of religion.

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