Podcast   Charles I the king behind the myths

It was a “serene and clear day” as the coffin of Charles I was brought out of the hall at Windsor Castle. The coffin was borne by gentlemen in mourning, and four peers carried a black velvet pall. As they stepped forward, snow began to fall; by the time they reached St George’s Chapel, where the king was to be interred, “the black velvet pall was all white” – the “colour of innocence”, as one witness later described it, recalling that Charles had been crowned in white: “And so’ he said, ‘ went the white king to his grave”.

This was fake history. The witness, Thomas Herbert, was a professional liar employed by parliament to spy on Charles in his captivity. He surely did not believe in Charles’s innocence that day, if he ever did.

I am the historian Leanda de Lisle, uncovering the Tudors and Stuarts behind the myths

The legend that Charles had been crowned in white was untrue, but much had been made of it. In labelling him the “White King”, Charles’s opponents were evoking the prophecies of Merlin, which described a dreadful tyrant who was destined for a violent death. Conversely, the king’s supporters claimed that Charles’s white coronation robes had reflected his saintliness, and that he had died a martyr. When Herbert wrote his memoirs, during the reign of Charles II, it was politic to remember him that way. And the snow, like the white robes, melts into myth.

Today, the sobriquet of the White King, lauded by friends and condemned by enemies, is largely forgotten. But something just as extreme remains: Charles is pinned to the pages of history as a failed king, executed at the hands of his own subjects and preserved in popular memory like some exotic but desiccated insect. In many popular accounts, it seems, Charles was doomed from birth, his character immutable.

We like to believe that we have turned our back on old prejudices, but the way we remember Charles shows how they continue to influence the way we think. In the past, disabilities were seen as marks of humanity’s fallen nature. The same shorthand is still used, and it is common for Charles’s fate to be traced back to the physical difficulties of his childhood, as if his weak legs were physical manifestations of weakness of character. The resilience and determination he showed in overcoming his disability, emerging as an athletic prince, is surely more interesting.

Instead of a survivor, though, we are presented with the narrative of a sickly child maturing into an effete adult. Charles’s youthful indiscretions with women go unremarked, and even his passion for art, shared by his militaristic elder brother

Henry, -- who died young - is judged prissy rather than princely. There is little hint of the virility of a king who sired a large brood of children. Indeed, the happiness of Charles's marriage is grist to the mill.

In the early modern period, 'effeminate' was not a term of abuse for homosexuals but described men who enjoyed female company. A similar attitude is evident in the modern fashion for the 'bromance' with its philosophy of bros before hoes. Strikingly Charles judged is less than a man because he loved his wife, while her reputation in turn is itself shaped by old misogynistic attitudes. Since Eve, women have been accused of seducing men into evil. So it was with Charles, whose Catholic queen, Henrietta Maria, supposedly persuaded him to become a Euro-Catholic-tyrant in Protestant, parliamentary Britain, setting him on the path to ruin.

This traditional view of Charles covers the tracks of those who shared responsibility for the horrors of the Civil War. It also inspires indifference to the period. Despite the wealth of exciting new scholarship and the thrilling story of the king's life, the well-trodden ground of the Tudors continues to grab more attention. Yet the drama of the Tudor age did not end with the death of Elizabeth I. As Charles ascended to the throne, questions raised during the Tudor era about faith and power awaited their bloody resolution.

The Church of England, with its episcopate (rule by bishops), remained only half reformed. Though Charles thought it "the best in the world", for others its combination of Calvinist theology and Catholic structure was a dangerous "mingle mangle of the Popish government with pure doctrine".

Such Calvinists feared their faith was fragile in Britain. In Europe, the Counter Reformation was triumphing in the devastating Thirty Years War, which evolved from a Protestant rebellion against the Catholic Holy Roman Emperor, while in England, Protestantism had already proved vulnerable to the whims of Tudor monarchs. To defend themselves during the reign of the Catholic Mary I, Protestants had developed 'resistance' theories. These argued that kings took their authority from the people, who therefore had the right to overthrow (or indeed kill) any monarch of the 'wrong' religion – and for Calvinists this included the 'wrong' kind of Protestantism.

Charles's father, King James VI and I, had confronted this religious justification for terror by arguing that kings, like bishops, drew their authority from God, that they ruled by divine right, and that only God could punish them – lessons in power that Charles had embraced.

Charles's first years as king revealed a man of energy and action. He took his kingdoms into the Thirty Years' War, fighting for Stuart dynastic interests and the Protestant cause. He also began to put his stamp on his kingdoms. His was a cinematic imagination, and he used a theatre of ceremony, ritual and beauty to shape a socially deferential and hierarchical society appropriate to divine right monarchy.

In English churches, parishioners witnessed a move away from a Calvinist focus on sermons and extempore prayers in plain buildings to a new style of protestant worship with ritual and ceremony set in churches adorned with religious imagery. Some liked this change, but others believed that it threatened the Church of England's Calvinist traditions. Meanwhile, successive military failures saw the fear of Counter-Reformation triumph become more acute. When parliament failed to provide Charles with the taxes he needed to wage war, and instead attempted to impeach his leading minister, the Duke of Buckingham, he extended his royal power in order to raise money by other means. This threatened to make parliament redundant, ramping up the sense of national peril.

Charles accepted that there were great benefits to working with his MPs but, like his Scots father, James, he never fully appreciated parliament's significance to the English people. Nor was he able overcome his instincts and invest more trust in his MPs and in his own power to control and intimidate them, accepting the compromises and slights to his regal authority that the messy business of politics sometimes required.

Charles was, in his private life, "the best master, the best friend, the best husband, the best father": loving and loved. Yet he distrusted appeals to the emotions. He had absorbed his father's lessons concerning the dangers of 'populism' (by which James meant demagogy), and also had no instinct for it. He found people difficult to read, and his inability to interpret their actions and feelings often left him angry and frustrated. Form and order mediated relationships in a way with which he was comfortable. Equally, any challenge to form and order felt extremely threatening.

Charles believed that the war abroad had opened up a new front at home, where he faced enemies who were less anxious to do their duty to their country and king than to dictate royal policy. He felt that they manipulated public opinion, and that their narrow interpretation of Protestantism only encouraged their sedition and demagogy.

In 1628, Buckingham was assassinated. The following year, the breakdown in trust between king and MPs saw the beginning of 11 years of Charles's personal rule without parliament. In contrast to the reigns of the Tudors, there were no political or religious executions during this period. Indeed, in the later view of some of his supporters, the so-called "eleven years' tyranny" was not nearly tyrannical enough. Though Charles was self-righteous, he was rarely ruthless. This emboldened his enemies, and they proved more willing than he was to shed blood.

In 1640, a knot of opposition peers, led by men like Robert Rich Earl of Warwick, and Puritan allies such the MP John Pym, plotted an invasion of England in treasonous alliance with Scots rebels, who had opposed the imposition of a new Prayer Book, and were now determined to abolish episcopacy. The Scots victory and occupation of the north forced Charles to call what became known as the Long Parliament, to raise tax money to either pay the Scots to leave, or to fight them. But the Long Parliament also gave a platform to Charles enemies.

In the past the opposition had wanted to protect and promote English Calvinism, and the 'liberties of the subject', expressed in the free debates of parliament. Now, however, leaders like Warwick and Pym were anxious to divest Charles of any powers that might later enable him to revenge himself on them for their treason with the Scots. They would also remove any minister capable of opposing them.

Charles's leading hardman, the Earl of Strafford, who had threatened to use an Irish army against the Scots, was arrested shortly after Parliament had assembled, on trumped up charges of treason, and was executed in 1641 without conviction at trial. Meanwhile, the opposition was also whipping up ethnic and religious hatreds to create a climate of fear that would help justify their increasingly radical moves. English Catholics were accused of storing weapons, and their priests were executed, to create an illusion of immediate threat, while targeted mob violence and mass petitions were used to intimidate English MPs to push through the legislation men like Warwick and Pym wanted. Rebellion in Ireland helped to raise fears to a still further, with the spreading of exaggerated reports of the massacres of Protestants.

By 1642, the new media of pamphlets and newssheets, together with sermons and political speeches, had built a narrative that would justify rebellion as a necessary defence against 'popery' - a term which described a form of religious and political tyranny associated with the Counter Reformation but which could be applied to any reverse to Calvinism - and the seductive Henrietta Maria was being trolled as the papist-in-chief.

Charles in fact despised the pope and there were too few Catholics in England to pose any threat to the nation. The Civil War instead set Protestant against Protestant, fighting over the nature of the Church of England and where exactly the balance of power between king and parliament should lie. The radicalism pursued by men like Warwick and Pym, were as responsible for the Civil war as anything Charles had done. With Charles having now accepted he could no longer rule without parliament, many MPs would fight for the king's cause against those they judged to be an ambitious clique allied to extremists and fanatics.

Most people expected the war to end with one great battle that the king would lose. But Charles was changing, and began to show new skills of leadership. Parliament had control of London, and the majority of England's wealth and population. For a time, they also had the backing of the Scots. Nevertheless, it took four years for parliament to defeat Charles militarily. "He was very fearless in his person" in battle, and he would show equal courage in the grindstone of captivity.

Imprisoned from 1646, Charles never gave up the struggle to get the best terms for his restoration as king. His final sticking points remained a refusal to betray his God, by denying episcopacy was divinely instituted, or his brothers in arms, by giving up his friends to punishment. Until the last day of his trial Charles hoped he could yet strike a deal, ruthlessly threatening a new war in Ireland to get it. That hope of a deal was disappointed, but he had also learned the power of print, and had helped prepare the

Eikon Basilike (Royal Portrait), a purportedly autobiographical work of propaganda that gave his cause life after his death, with the king remembered as a martyr.

In reality, Charles had been neither a saint nor his wife's weak puppet, but a man of great courage, immense resilience and high principles who also had human flaws. His life inspires the sympathy of tragedy, and when he died he was loved in a way that his son, the cynical, merry Charles II, would never be. His legacy is the Church of England, with its bishops and choral music, and which even in our secular age is an important part of English culture. But the intensely moving drama of the "White King" – also remains. A tale of misogyny, mass movements and a new media, of populist politicians and religious terror, of civil wars and the hopes of a different future, this is a story that speaks to our time.

If you are interested in reading more about Charles I, and the continuation of the Tudor story under the Stuarts, you might enjoy my new biography The White King: Charles I, Traitor, Murderer, Martyr. It is now published in the United States, and will be released in the UK on 11 January 2018. And do feel free to ask me any questions via my website, facebook or twitter