

Read the following views of the execution of Charles I. **Briefly summarize each view and indicate any bias or point of view that can be attributed to the commentator.**

The Execution of Charles I: History and Perspectives

condensed and edited by: Freida H. Blackwell & Jay Losey

History, as defined by some, consists of two parts: the event and the writer's interpretation of the event. As one reads historical accounts, one should be aware how the perspective of the narrator shapes the emerging historical account. The narrator's underlying aesthetics, world vision, political leanings, and/or cultural context can all determine his/her approach to the material being narrated. The narrator may shape the narrative historical account by including structuring or ordering the events, selecting the word choices and descriptions, and deciding the detail to be included or omitted.

The following is edited from Siebert, Donald T. "The Aesthetic Execution of Charles I: Clarendon to Hume." *Executions and the British Experience from the 17th to the 20th Century: A Collection of Essays*. Ed. William B. Thesing. Jefferson, NC: McFarland 1979, 7-27.

The execution of Great Britain's Charles I in 1648 became the focus of many historical narratives through several centuries. The death of this king evoked strong emotions on both sides of the political struggle, reflected in the various accounts which appeared. Furthermore, the idea of executing the head of state, literally beheading him, aroused great interest among the populace. Below are excerpts from several histories of England, which include accounts of the execution of the monarch. Notice the date, the narrative stance assumed by the narrator and how the perspective affects the reader's reaction to the events. Notice, too, whether the narrator is presenting "just the facts" or trying to present the event in an aesthetically arranged manner. What does each presentation reveal about the narrator's attitude and his biases?

1. Laurence Echard, *The History of England*, 3d ed. (London, 1720).

The "last Scene of this Tragedy" happened on "a very cold dark Day--a Day melancholy & dismal beyond any that England had ever yet beheld." Charles approached the black-draped scaffold. Beside the block and ax were "Hooks and Staples to drag [the king] to Execution, should he make any sort of Resistance." Charles looked "round upon the vast Throngs of People, who with bleeding Hearts and weeping Eyes press'd to behold this dismal Spectacle . . . His Head was at one Blow sever'd from his Body . . . None of the kings of England ever left the World with more open Marks of Sorrow and Affection. The venerable Archbishop Usher, from a Window, swooned at the sight of the fatal Blow, as at a Prodigy too great for Heaven to permit, or the Earth to behold: And as the Rumour of his Death spread throughout the Kingdom, Women miscarry'd, many of both Sexes fell into Palpitations, Swoonings and Melancholy and some, with sudden Consternations, expired."

Summary: _____

Bias/POV: _____

2. Bulstrode Whitelock, Memorials (1682).

For the king, indeed I will not--then turning to a gentleman that touched the axe he said, --Hurt not the axe that may hurt me. For the king, the laws of this land . . .

John Rushworth. Historical Collections (1659-1701)

This Day his Majesty was brought from St. James, about 10 in the Morning, walking on foot through the Park, with a Regiment of Foot for his Guard, with Colours flying, Drums beating, his private Guard of Partizans, with some of his Gentlemen before, and some behind, bear-headed [sic] . . .

The king came upon the scaffold, noticed the great crowd of people, walked around the scaffold and looked "earnestly" at the block, asked if it could not be higher, then spoke to those present on the scaffold . . .

After which the Kind stooping down, laid his Neck upon the Block; and after a little pause, stretching forth his hands, the Executioner at one blow severed his Head from his Body. Then his Body was put in a Coffin.

Summary:

Bias/POV:

3. White Kennet, A Complete History of England. 2nd ed. (London, 1719).

On the night before his execution, the king, slept four hours, woke early and called to his valet Herbert, who had slept fitfully on a pallet beside the king, to fetch his best clothes, for today is his "second Marriage-Day" and before night he hoped "to be espoused to [his] blessed Jesus." He also had to dress warmly so as not to shake from the cold and give the impression he was afraid. Bishop Juxon later read from Matthew 27 on the Passion of Christ. The king was pleased with the choice and even more so when he learned that this passage happened to be the lesson for the day in the liturgy . . . "The King . . . thought it a providential Preparation for his Death."

Charles' last words to his daughter Elizabeth were, "He bid her tell her Mother, that his Thoughts had never strayed from her, and that Love should be the same to the last."

The king ask'd the Executioner, Is my Hair well? And taking off his Cloak and George [Order of St. George], he deliver'd his George to the Bishop, saying Remember. Then putting off his Doublet, and being in his Wastecoat, he put on his Cloak again, and looking upon the Block, said to the Executioner, You must set it fast. Being told by him it could be now no higher, the King said, When I put out my Hands, then. --And saying a few words to himself as he stood, with Hands and Eyes lift up, immediately stooping down, he laid his Neck upon the Block, and the Executioner again putting his Hair under his Cap, his Majesty thinking he had been going to strike, bad him Stay for the sign; to which the Executioner said, "Yes I will and it please your Majesty." So after a short pause, his Majesty stretching

forth his Hands, the Executioner (who was all the while in a Mask) at one Blow severed his Head from his Body, which being held up and shewed to the astonish'd People, was with his Body put into a Coffin covered with black Velvet, and carried into his Lodging-Chamber in Whitehall.

It must be dreadfully remember'd, that the cruel Powers did suspect, that the King would not submit his Head to the Block; and therefore to bring him down by Violence to it, they had prepared Hooks and Staples (made by a Smith in Aldgate) to hawl him as a Victim to the Slaughter."

. . . by the Example of his Savior, he resisted not, he disappointed their Wit, and yielded to their Malice."

Summary: _____

Bias/POV: _____

4. Lord Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England*, (1816).

Lord Clarendon never mentions the execution directly, stating,

The most execrable murder that was ever committed since that of our blessed Savior . . . is so well known . . . that the farther mentioning it in this place would but afflict and grieve the reader, and make the relation itself odious as well as needless.

After the execution . . . There the King's body was laid without any words, or other ceremonies than the tears and sighs of the few beholders. Upon the coffin was a plate of silver fixed with these words only, King Charles 1648.

To conclude, he was the worthiest gentleman, the best master, the best friend, the best husband, the best father, and the best Christian, that the age in which he lived produced. And if he were the not the greatest king, if he were without some parts and qualities which have made some kings great and happy, no other prince was ever unhappy who was possessed of half his virtues and endowments, and so much without any kind of vice.

Summary: _____

Bias/POV: _____

5. David Hume, *The History of England*, (1754-62).

Hume describes Charles I at both ends of his account as "a good rather than . . . a great man," In the "last scene of his life, . . . he never forgot his part, either as a prince or as a man. . . . His soul, without effort

or affectation, seemed only to remain in situation familiar to it, and to look down with contempt on all the efforts of human malice and iniquity." Hume mentions in the long passage leading up to the execution that Charles I managed to sleep soundly while the carpenters hammered away on his scaffold. (Later historians record that the distance between St. James Palace and Whitewall is great enough that it would have been virtually impossible for Charles to have heard the hammers.)

Charles's last words to his daughter Elizabeth were "the king gave her in charge to tell the queen, that during the whole course of his life, he had never once, even in thought, failed in his fidelity towards her; and that his conjugal tenderness and his life should have equal duration."

The scaffold had been placed before Whitewall to "display . . . the triumph of popular justice over royal majesty."

Charles steps onto the scaffold, sees that he cannot be heard by the multitude, and hence addresses "the few persons who were about him; particularly Colonel Tomlinson, to whose care he had lately been committed, and upon whom, as upon many others his amiable deportment had wrought an entire conversion."

The people, though under the rod of lawless, unlimited power, could not forbear, with most ardent prayers, pouring forth their wishes for his preservation; and, in his present distress, they avowed him, by their generous tears, for their monarch, whom, in their misguided fury, they had before so violently rejected. The king was softened at this moving scene, and expressed his gratitude for their dutiful affection.

Hume flirts with the possibility of Charles as a martyr or even a Christ figure, recording that "he forgave all his enemies, even the chief instruments of his death." Hume, of course, would not believe in Christ, grace, salvation, eternity, etc.

When he was preparing himself for the block, Bishop Juxon called to him: "There is, Sir, but one stage more, which, though turbulent and troublesome, is yet a very short one. Consider, it will soon carry you a great way; it will carry you from earth to heaven; and there you shall find, to your great joy, the prize to which you hasten, a crown of glory." "I go," replied the king, "from a corruptible to an incorruptible crown: where no disturbance can have place." At one blow was his head severed from his body. A man in a vixor performed the office of executioner: Another, in a like disguise, held up to the spectators, the head, streaming with blood, and cried aloud, This is the head of a traitor!

After the execution, Hume records:

It is impossible to describe the grief, indignation, and astonishment, which took place . . . throughout the whole nation, as soon as the report of this fatal execution was conveyed to them . . . Women are said to have cast forth the untimely fruit of their womb: Others fell into convulsions, or sunk into such a melancholy as attended them to their grave: Nay, some, unmindful of themselves, as though they could not, or would not survive their beloved prince, it is reported, suddenly fell down dead.

Summary:

Bias/POV: _____

6. Catherine Macaulay History of England, (1768).

Macaulay attempted to answer Hume's supposedly Tory account of Charles I's execution.

Macaulay states that Charles exhibited "the magnanimity of heroism and the patience of martyrdom," but reminds readers that he was an evil king.

To a mind softened by habits of amusement, and intoxicated with ideas of self-importance, the transition from royal pomp to a prison, from easy, gay, and luxurious life to a premature and violent death by the hands of an executioner, are punishments so sharp and touching, that, in the suffering prince, we are apt to overlook the designing tyrant, to dwell on his hardships, and forget his crimes.

Whilst he was preparing for execution, the bishop poured out a few insipid lifeless exhortations: To these the King returned, "I go from a corruptible to an incorruptible crown, where no disturbance can have place." Then laying his head upon the block, the executioner (whose face was concealed in a vizor) severed it with one stroke from the body: an assistant (in like disguise) held it up to the spectators, streaming with blood, and after the usual manner observed in similar executions, cried aloud, "This is the head of a traitor."

Summary: _____

Bias/POV: _____

As you have no doubt observed, the historical versions of Charles I's execution run through the spectrum of aesthetic possibility--from realistic to stylized, from close-range to distant, from dramatic to painterly, indeed from ridiculous to sublime. But however they handled the material, the historians of that event were simply responding to an assumption that executions typically contained an inherent aesthetic. Samuel Y. Edgerton has observed that "public execution probably reached its apogee of artful performance during the 16th century . . . The beheading of Charles I . . . was one of the last grand public executions in the medieval pageant tradition." It is not surprising, then, that 17th-and 18th-century historians would have tried to give the death of Charles I an aesthetic form.

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