PERSPECTIVE: The differing revolutions of Stone and Kishlansky

In both Lawrence Stone's Causes of the English Revolution and Mark Kishlansky's A Monarchy Transformed, the authors submit what they have interpreted to be the causes of the English Revolution under Charles I. The way in which they present history, however, differs slightly in their regard for individual figures and their chronological scope and consideration.

Stone adopts a predominantly "macro" perspective on the happenings of the mid-seventeenth century in that he does not actually limit his investigation to that era but instead spends the majority of his essay considering the events of the sixteenth. Discussion of the Revolution itself is limited to a few spare pages at the end, and the bulk of his book is as he intends it to be: "limited to defining the long-term factors which made some modifications of the political and religious institutions very probable" (Stone 146). For instance, despite his apparent antipathy towards the monarchs ("No sensible man could take [James's] claims too seriously" (94), "royal policies…were opportunistic, grasping, selfish, and rude" (127), "Impetuous folly" (133) and "bottomless duplicity of King Charles" (138), etc.), Stone largely remains unfocused on the actions of any individual figures. Though he theorizes that "a personally more charismatic king…might have continued [ruling]…without running into serious trouble" (133), he also claims that Charles I's decisions were "no more than one step in a long anterior chain…traced far back into the early Tudor period" (146).

It seems, then, that Stone is set upon both determinist and sociological views of history; an apparent sacrifice of free will in favor of laying any praise or blame on decades of complicated interactions between large groups in a society. Charles's belief and attempted reinforcement of his Divine Right was not unexpected – monarchs long before him assumed the same. In

fact, what the author names as "Tudor despotism" had its origins long before Henry VII and was enforced in other European countries at the time. However, Henry VIII's break with Rome began a spiral of increasing dependence upon the kindness and power of Parliament to fund and support the Crown, which in turn empowered the Houses to make more demands as the century moved onward. Seen from this perspective, the explosion of the Revolution after Parliament finally stared down Charles I seems quite a logical conclusion. Again, Stone posits this outcome as a result of an incompetent royalty – "The proven *untrustworthiness* of the King *inevitably* forced Pym and his allies to increase their demands, out of sheer *necessity* of *self-preservation*. They now genuinely feared for their lives…they were therefore *obliged*…to demand control over the armed forces" (138)[1]. To Stone, Charles I's continued, narcissistic abuse of his royal prerogative ultimately led the country into dangerous ground and forced Parliament's hand. But he makes it clear that the social, economic, and political relations in England were well-troubled long before Charles I mounted the throne.

Kishlansky, on the other hand, espouses the more "micro", historicist standpoint. Though he takes care to write roughly the first half of his book providing the appropriate historical background of Charles's reign, he also focuses his lens much more fixedly on the drama of individual figures and then follows the climax with a long dénouement detailing the ultimate failure of anti-monarchical rule. Each chapter begins with an italicized and stylized recounting of the personal experiences of characters such as Guy Fawkes or the King and then progresses into a vivid account of the happenings of the Revolution. He develops identities for James I ("He was athletic and loved to ride…doted on his Danish wife…crass, not callous" (Kishlansky 69)), Charles I ("Fastidious in his personal life and methodical in his government…an aesthete" (118)), and John Pym ("A man of mean estate and modest station…[with] social self-effacement" (142)).

[1] emphasis added

Unlike Stone, Kishlansky seems more sympathetic towards the monarchs, depicting them as relatable people who made some unfortunate decisions and were preyed upon. In fact, the author's theatricality when relating the lives of seventeenth-century England extends almost into the arena of a historical novel with passages like that of Charles's execution and the monarch's conversation with his ten-year-old son, Henry.

The effect of these passages is humanizing and specific; each player in his history is responding to the events in the present and thus elicits more definite consequences. James's loose rein on England created division within his Council and his increasing debt exacerbated his relationship with Parliament. Likewise, Charles gradually loses his grasp of his Divine Right because of fiscal debt accrued and Parliament takes advantage of the King's situation. Thus, Kishlansky's language implies a Parliament and Pym more insidious and opportunist than Stone's self-defending Houses of the people. He writes, "The mistrust that members of Parliament felt towards their king, their *paranoia* about plots and their *delusions* about Charles's intentions were crucial components in the origins of the Civil War" (145)[2]. In Kishlansky's writing, Charles seems less a self-interested despot and more a misstepping and misguided but ultimately forgiveable monarch who attempted to use the traditional Divine Right in self-defense from an increasingly antagonistic governing elite. It is only after "a year of concession and humiliation [that] Charles I…finally decided to seize the initiative from the House of Commons" (134). According to Kishlansky, it was Charles I's hand that was forced.

So where lay the blame? Attribution is ultimately impossible. However, we may question the effectiveness of these authors' arguments. On one hand, a "macro" view like Stone's offers a wide range of lessons: because of its broader scope, its outcomes and influences can be applied to the fates of other societies and epochs, which would in turn act to prevent the repetition of the Revolutionary state as such; it serves to shift the

[2] emphasis added.

culpability to a larger mentality/group of people rather than focusing on the foolishness of just one person; and it promotes and appreciation of the intricacy and interconnectedness of human interaction and consequence in a manner quite sociological. However, this point of view also remains somewhat ignorant of the idea of free will, seems to promote more uncertainty and backward-looking than Kishlansky's standpoint, and comes across as very dry and impersonal in writing.

In contrast, Kishlansky's "micro" humanist perspective is more engaging and makes it easier for the contemporary reader to sympathize with select historical figures long dead. It makes history more emotionally real, more compelling, and more understandable. One may argue that the humanization of these mummified personas helps to fascinate and encourage the literary imagination and enrich the body of discourse about events like the English Revolution and its main players. Personal relation evokes a stronger response in the realm of art because each work is interpreted individually by each reader, viewer, or listener according to his or her own mentality. But then the argument could also be turned to say that the flux of art interacts more intimately with the flow and ebb of larger societal concerns: it is the social context which adds meaning to much canonical literary pieces and artwork, and it is consideration for social context which makes them effective today. In the end, I think both points of view are instrumental in recreating history for a younger generation – for invoking emotion and tempering it with understanding about societal causation.