

## King James I of England

By John R. Mabry



*“Elizabeth  
was King,  
and now  
James is  
Queen...”*

**K**ing James was the son of Mary, Queen of Scots, and her husband Lord Darnley. James was a wan and sickly child, and would remain in frail health for the whole of his life. His father was murdered when he was not yet a year old, probably on the order of his mother. Queen Mary was deposed by the Scottish lords when James was just barely a year old, and she fled to England to seek safe haven from her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth did indeed keep her safe for the next twenty years, in prison, after which she had her killed. The lesson of history is clear: never mind the peasants or the foreign powers—when you’re royalty, your real enemies are your own flesh and blood.

With Mary gone, pretty much for good, King James was crowned King of Scotland at the ripe old age of thirteen months. Scottish reformer John Knox preached at his coronation.

James was one of the most strenuously educated monarchs in history. It was said that he mastered Latin before he could speak his native Scots, and before he came of age he spoke Greek, Latin, French, English, Italian, and Spanish fluently. As a result, he was one of the few heads of state who conducted business abroad without the need for translators. In addition to languages, he was also well schooled in composition, history, astronomy, philosophy, and theology.

All of this learning was not in vain, as he proved to be an able ruler. He actively began to govern Scotland when he was nineteen, and continued as her monarch for thirty-six years. During this time, Queen Elizabeth groomed him as her successor, and they kept up a lively—though sometimes contentious—correspondence.

He is not only known for his letters, however. King James was a prolific writer, and was widely read in his day. He had a friendly and accessible prose style that eschewed the didactic pretensions of most scholarly writing of his time, and this made him a very popular author indeed, not only among the intelligentsia, but amongst the common folk as well. He

published volumes of poetry, and books on statesmanship and theology, including a two-volume exploration of witchcraft and demonology.

He was no slouch, then, as either a ruler or a scholar, and he was well-loved by his subjects. This love was to expand beyond his borders very soon, for when Elizabeth died in 1603, he was proclaimed King, not just of Scotland, but of England as well. Amazingly, the English did not chafe at being ruled by a Scot, but welcomed him with open arms. His procession from Scotland down to London turned into a parade as thousands joined in, turning the journey into a travelling party, and a festival atmosphere pervaded the island. James was so overwhelmed by the outpouring of emotion for him that he granted over 300 knighthoods on the journey south alone—more than Elizabeth had done in her entire reign.

There is, of course, a sizable irony, here. England had long suffered the obstinacy of the Scots. They were not a people who were easily conquered. Anyone who has studied the history of the British Isles—or even anyone who has seen such films as *Braveheart* or *Rob Roy*—will know what I mean. England had never entirely succeeded in cowing the Scots, who fought fiercely for their independence, even if it had come to be only the appearance of independence. No English monarch had succeeded in uniting England and Scotland into one nation, and none would.

Instead, it took a Scotsman to do it. And in so doing scholarly, effeminate, sickly King James did what hale and manly Robert the Bruce and William Wallace were unable to do—in fact, did not dream of doing. For while these two Scottish heroes fought to simply be free of English rule, James, without spilling a drop of blood, conquered the English.

The Scots would not suffer an English king to be their lord, but a Scottish king to rule the English, that was an idea they could rally behind! It was payback, and the Scottish reveled in it. And amazingly, the English did not

seem to notice the slight. It was King James himself who coined the term “Great Britain” to designate the united island nation.

There was a great deal of nervousness in England as to just what the new King’s religious persuasions were, and how that would effect the nation. There had been so much rancor and bloodshed as England swung from Anglican to Roman Catholic and back to Anglican under Henry, Mary, and Elizabeth, nearly everyone was anxious not to repeat the religious upsets that still haunted recent memory.

The great tension in England at the time was between the Catholics (whom the liturgy and vestments of the Church of England barely pacified) and the Puritans, who felt the reforms had not gone nearly far enough, and deeply resented the “popery” of the Church’s ceremonies and its episcopal control of local parishes. The Catholics held scant hope that King James would return England to Catholicism (even though his mother was a Catholic, and he himself had been rumored to have Catholic-leaning sentiments), but the Puritans were encouraged by the fact that their new King came to them from Presbyterian Scotland. Surely, they reasoned, the King approved of the Presbyterian system, and might move the Church of England toward further reformatations. They reasoned wrong. James’ relationship with the Presbyterian Church of Scotland was contentious at best. In point of fact, he despised the Presbyterian system, which he felt to be a threat to his kingly authority. Believing the Episcopal system to be a mirror of—and supportive of—his own kingly authority, he embraced the Church of England as it was, and promoted it through his own theological writings. Although many in the Church were initially suspicious of the new King, they quickly warmed to his agenda.

He also was responsible for colonizing New England, and under his reign Virginia, Massachusetts, and Nova Scotia (which actually means “New Scotland”) were founded and supported.

A man of profoundly ambiguous sexuality, the English were fond of saying “Elizabeth was King, and now James is Queen,” and indeed, though he sired many children by his wife, Anne, he also had long-term relationships with a series of men, chief among them his longstanding affair with George Villiers, whom he named Duke of Buckingham. His love letters to Villiers survive today, and are an important resource for gay history and scholarship.

Not surprisingly, James eschewed such macho pursuits as warfare and was an avid supporter of the arts. James was a great fan of John Donne, whom he appointed Dean of St. Paul’s cathedral. Shakespeare and Ben Johnson were favorites of his, and “Macbeth” was written specifically for him. Shakespeare’s company was even known as “the King’s Men.”

But for all his many accomplishments, King James is best known for commissioning the Bible that bears his name (see sidebar for more on the “King James Version”).

He ruled England well, and at the age of 59, finally succumbed to the poor health that had always plagued him. He died on March 27, 1625, and was interred in Westminster Abbey, with his wife Anne buried nearby. ■

## The King James Version, the Best-Selling Book of All Time

At the beginning of James I’s reign in England, English translations of the scriptures were rare. Large editions of the Bishop’s Bible and the Great Bible could be found in churches, but there were few copies available to the common people. One edition that was quickly gaining popularity was the Geneva Bible, produced by English Puritans who had fled to Switzerland to avoid the persecution of Protestants under the reign of “Bloody” Mary.

James had numerous objections to the Geneva Bible. Chief among them was the extensive notes accompanying the text. These notes interpreted the scripture in light of reformed doctrine, some of which James considered radical. Some of it might even have been treasonous, depending upon one’s take on it.

Another kingly objection was the simple fact that the book was printed on the continent and imported; thus the King received no “cut” of the profits of this exceedingly popular Bible. A “proper” version, he thought, should be translated and published in England where strict controls could be implemented as regards nuance, notes, printing, and the proper payment of fees.

In 1604 he called a committee of 54 translators together and charged them with creating a definitive translation of the holy scriptures to be used in all churches in Great Britain. The resulting King James Version is probably the only great work of English literature produced by committee, and is the best-selling book of all time.

Alas, it took awhile before this august reputation took hold, and King James was not to see it in his lifetime. The printer of the “Authorized Version” went bankrupt, and the people continued to prefer the Geneva Bible with its extensive—if arguably seditious—marginal notation.

It took another generation for the English-speaking world to catch on to the amazing literary treasure the King James Version truly was. Its cadences and language have influenced both American and British English more than any other piece of literature. And for many Christians, it is the one and only inspired Word of God (after all, one preacher was heard to say, “If the King James Bible was good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for me”). ■