

Conclusion

Hamilton the man comes across in many descriptions as a sophisticated nobleman, with impeccable manners, dressed in expensive clothes, and accompanied by servants and retainers. He was acutely aware of his role as the head of one of the ancient Scottish noble families and having a blood connection with the Stuart royal family. He fashioned himself around that genealogy. His entry into Stettin in Germany on 28 August 1631 in a coach pulled by six richly decorated horses, accompanied by personal servants in Hamilton liveries, nearly 250 halberdiers and 200 guards underlined his noble and blood royal credentials. Whether it was in Stettin, Edinburgh or London, Hamilton consciously projected his status and nobility.¹ Although he was unhappy about his arranged marriage in 1622 to the duke of Buckingham's niece, Mary Feilding, the marriage produced six children – three sons and three daughters, but only two daughters survived into adulthood. His wife died on 10 May 1638, while his only remaining son Charles followed on 30 April 1640 and thereafter he seems to have taken more responsibility for the two girls, making careful arrangements for their care and safety. His eldest daughter, Anne, succeeded to the family titles by special remainder in 1651.

During various stages of the three kingdom crisis he succumbed to emotional and physical breakdown, such as in 1638, 1646 and 1647 all of which appear genuine, rather than diplomatic illnesses. The extreme stress of those situations make these episodes understandable. A few times the surviving correspondence reveals a sense of humour and irony that comes across as characteristically Scottish.² It is a difficult task to see the human being through official records, formal correspondence and contemporary accounts and comments, but what little that has survived suggest that Hamilton was a conscientious father, committed friend and skilled communicator.

¹ Chapter 2, p.35.

² Chapter 4, p.89, the humour turns on the mention of a 'spirituall invention' in Edinburgh in 1638 being enough to make the few that have not lost their wits 'goe as mad as the rest'.

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From the beginning of this study, the labels used to describe Hamilton the public figure are ‘moderate’, ‘conciliator’, ‘consummate courtier’, ‘negotiator’, ‘honest-broker’ and ‘politician to his fingertips’, and it has been regularly stressed that our subject defies neat political and religious categorisation. The archive out of which Hamilton emerged helped shape the life as it is presented. The survival of numerous drafts and letter sequences in the Hamilton archive are the actions of someone with an eye to possible censure and to posterity. At times he has been the slipperiest of subjects. Hamilton has emerged as a skilled politician and courtier trying to navigate some of the most hazardous circumstances of the early modern period. Rather than being the unprincipled political equivocator described by historians from Clarendon to Gardiner, he was an example of a courtier politician in which harmony, honour, respect and the achievement of political balance were his guiding principles. He was less a political equivocator, and more a minister firmly grounded in the reality of a situation and willing to modify his aspirations or ideas to effect a solution.

Hamilton rarely refused to budge because his conscience would brook no compromise. He was not a Pym or a Wariston, nor was he an Argyll or a Saye. In fact, neither was he a Digby, a Montrose or a Rupert. That is not to say, however, that he did not have political and religious convictions, for clearly he did. Rather, he possessed a fluid political mentalité, where a minister’s objective lay in maintaining harmony within the body politic and restoring it through negotiation and compromise when it became seriously unbalanced. And under Charles I the body politic was in a critical condition throughout the 1640s.

Hamilton’s actions in the early part of this study show that he had a principled belief in the rights of the Palatine family and in the international Protestant cause. This found practical expression in his hopeful expedition to Germany in 1631–2 and his continued support of these defining issues throughout his career. (It may also have left him with stark memories of the devastation war could visit on a country.) Even though he differed with the king and most of his ministers on how to advance this cause, he remained at court and worked effectively within the government. Of course, he inched forward with his own agenda when an opportunity presented itself, but not too far that it created a rift with Charles. If, as was the case for most of the Personal Rule, Hamilton’s views did not accord with the dominant political creed held by the king and his government, then he made progress where he could. Ever the courtier, he always had one eye on the king.

What Hamilton did was always governed by the politics of the possible: what was attainable given the set of circumstances at a particular time. This was something which he tried to teach his friend, Charles I, in 1638: concessions required to settle Scotland in June 1638 had little value six months later. When in August 1638, Hamilton told Laud about the Covenanters’ radical agenda, which included the abolition of episcopacy, he admitted that he could think of no ‘remedies’ to counteract this which would satisfy the king’s honour – ‘yett eiviles the leist is to be choysed.’³ Politics under the lumpy rule of Charles I was about making choices, about choosing the least of so many evils. In the transformed political landscape of 1638 and beyond, it was about conceding a little ground to avoid conceding a lot of ground. Once the National Covenant was first signed on 28 February 1638, a return to the status quo ante was no longer a negotiating position. Hamilton knew that, but the king unfortunately did not. He failed in 1638, and in later years, to make Charles face the political reality of each successive crisis as it came along; and what would be required to achieve settlement, to restore some kind of balance. Settlement depended just as much on the timing of the concessions, as it did on the concessions themselves: Charles always gave too little, too late.

Even worse, when Charles seemed ready to concede ground he was often actively plotting to undermine those with whom he was negotiating. In these circumstances, he was a very difficult

³ NRS, GD 406/1/560.

and frustrating king for Hamilton to serve. As the crisis deepened, especially after the peace of Berwick in the summer of 1639, and more obviously following the assembly of the Long Parliament in England, Hamilton successfully built bridges to the king's opponents in Scotland and England, as a way of preserving himself from censure and as a means of keeping the process of settlement alive. As a consequence, Charles colluded in the plot known as the Incident in 1641 and in 1643 had Hamilton imprisoned for three years without trial.

But he was not the only one of Charles I's ministers to try and steer the king and his opponents towards compromise. Amongst the Scots there was Traquair, Loudoun and Lennox, and of the English advisers Dorset, Hyde, Hertford and Falkland, to name a few.⁴ Labelling Hamilton as a moderate, even a moderate royalist, is useful, but describing him as a constitutional royalist requires some explanation. During the Personal Rule, Hamilton may have favoured calling a parliament in England to facilitate a more active foreign policy abroad and to open up the government at home. In the first session of the Long Parliament and in the Scottish parliament of 1641, he played a valuable role in moving negotiations nearer to a constitutional settlement. Likewise, he likely approved of the constitutional restraints imposed on the king over the first session of the Long Parliament. In that sense, then, he was a constitutional royalist, but unfortunately we have no record of him expressing approval of parliaments or endorsing the view that Charles I needed to be hemmed in by constitutional restraints. He was certainly a frequent attender of parliaments in England and Scotland and worked effectively in them. Yet his behaviour both in England and Scotland from November 1640 renders such a hypothesis highly probable. One suspects, however, that what we witness is Hamilton's growing realisation as the crisis unfolded that his friend Charles was untrustworthy and lacked sound judgement. That helps explain his commitment to settlement of the political crisis through cast iron agreements, rather than unflinching, or unthinking, loyalty to Charles I.

That is why he could not follow the king out of London following the attempt on the Five Members in January 1642. Neither could he choose sides in England in the summer of the same year. In vain he tried to keep the channels of communication open, but when the military conflict loomed he left king and parliament to their war. There was little question of him choosing sides in England, because most of his political exertions from 1637 had been guided by a commitment to avoiding war. In the same way, Hamilton's failure to keep Scotland out of the English Civil War left him with no-where to go. In desperation, he fled to the king at Oxford, and was imprisoned in late 1643 for the first phase of the military conflict. And that last roll of the dice, the Engagement, was a final attempt to save Charles from himself, resulting in both men being executed within a few weeks of each other in the first months of 1649.

There has been much debate and writing in the last four decades on the use of appropriate terminology for the mid-century conflicts which shaped Hamilton's life: English Civil Wars, British Civil Wars, Scottish Revolutions and Counter-Revolutions, Irish Rebellion, Wars of the Three Kingdoms, and various appellations around islands and archipelagos. With little discomfort, Hamilton fits neatly into any multi-kingdom or multiple-country category. His interests spanned Scotland, England, Ireland and Europe. In the first half of this study we saw how he aimed at developing political and commercial links in all three kingdoms, and competed with the elite of the English and Irish nobility for royal favour and influence. We saw also how Hamilton used his position as a court officer and as the king's blood relation to advance his many interests and those of his associates and clients. The British view, perhaps the European view, helps us to understand the scope of his interests and concerns. He was an Anglo-Scottish elite with a strong Scottish accent, phonetic Scottish handwriting and there is no evidence that he aimed to sever his contacts with Scotland in favour of a stake in England. The great-grandson of the duke of Chatelherault,

⁴ For an interesting study of the moderate or constitutional royalist, see David Smith, 'The More Posed and Wise Advice': The Fourth Earl of Dorset and the English Civil Wars', *The Historical Journal*, 34, 4 (1991), pp.797–829.

of the royal blood in Scotland and one of the largest landowners in Scotland had too much to lose by turning his back on his native kingdom.

In the second half of this study we had a British nobleman's view of the mushrooming crisis. And this was both revealing and distinctive. For not only did Hamilton's story reveal the dilemma of those moderate counsellors around the king, but it highlighted the way in which the crisis in one kingdom created fissures in the other two kingdoms and led to a three kingdom crisis of calamitous proportions. Each kingdom was shackled to the other two kingdoms by Charles I, and so we must lay the largest portion of the responsibility for what happened at his feet. Charles's refusal to accept Hamilton's counsel of 20 June 1638, when the king was warned that continued intransigence could result in 'the haserdding of your 3 crounes', was significant and clearly shows that at least one of the king's ministers from the very outset saw the long-term consequences of a sustained clash between the king and his opponents.⁵

Hamilton succeeded to his titles on 2 March 1625, about three weeks before Charles became king; and he was executed on 9 March 1649, a handful of weeks after Charles was executed. Such similar trajectories invites comparison between the two men. Charles's pursuit of order and formality in both church and state inevitably meant that he would upset a system, or systems, of government which largely depended on consensus for their smooth-running.⁶ The traditions of Elizabethan and Jacobean consensus were soon undermined. That Charles was an absentee king of Scotland put more strain on the system in his native kingdom, especially since he saw little need to cultivate the Scottish nobility – the traditional arbiters of law, order and kingship. The fundamental difference between the two men was that Hamilton was a skilled politician, that is, someone who was able to separate personal preferences from the politically possible. Charles viewed the Covenanters' opposition as a personal affront to his authority and honour, not as a national complaint against poorly conceived policies. He came to view his English adversaries in much the same way. Hamilton viewed the situation in terms of what would be needed to settle the crisis at each successive stage, in each successive kingdom. Charles was much more blinkered, never seeing that a particular line of action could throw up problems greater than the problem which the original policy was intended to address. Even worse, the king lacked integrity in negotiation and shamelessly played one group against the other, stringing out discussions in the hope that his fortunes would improve. In many ways, Charles reaped what he sowed.

It is perhaps appropriate that the Engagement, Hamilton's last public act was a political success and a military failure. His strength lay in his political and diplomatic skills. Yet whether through politics, diplomacy or war, he could not avert a decade of crisis that left three kingdoms broken and bleeding. The 1640s was a victory for those with a more radical purpose. Yet a system of rule based on consensus and hereditary monarchy in three kingdoms, and absentee monarchy in two of those kingdoms, was always prone to overheating when a king like Charles I came along. Hamilton and many other ministers and equally those opposing the king, did their best to find a workable settlement. But they had the king and a fragile system of government set against them.

⁵ See chapter 6, *passim*.

⁶ These points are discussed at greater length in Russell, *Causes*, pp.185–219; Reeve, *Rule*, *passim*, esp. pp.178, 292–296; Sharpe, *The Personal Rule of Charles I*, *passim*, esp. pp.922–954.