A – Z Scottish History: S is for the Stuarts

Arguably, the most famous family in Scottish history, the House of Stuart, originally Stewart, saw such monumental change under their rule, not only in Scotland but across the whole of the British Isles, with the creation of the United Kingdom. Scotland, under the House of Stuart, witnessed a flourishing court culture, the birth of four universities, a cultural renaissance, the emergence of the first printing press, groundbreaking scientific discoveries, political reform and heated religious debate. However, the period also suffered from war, plague, civil unrest, rebellion, religious and cultural persecution, ruthless witch trials, a notorious gunpowder plot and, of course, the executions of two ruling monarchs, Mary Queen of Scots and Charles I, to name but a few standout events.

The Stuarts ruled Scotland from 1371 and then England and Ireland also from 1603 until the death of Queen Anne in 1714. The name, Stewart, derives from the occupation of High Steward of Scotland, the person in charge of the domestic affairs of the royal household, which was the position held by the family progenitor, Walter fitz Alan (c. 1150) and Stewart became the family name by the time of his grandson, Walter Stewart. When Mary Queen of Scots, who was raised in France, ascended to the throne she changed the spelling of the name to the French style, Stuart. The first Stewart monarch was Robert II who ascended to the throne in 1371 when his uncle, David II, died childless. Robert was the son of Walter Stewart and Marjorie Bruce (daughter of Robert the Bruce), making Robert a legitimate successor.

In 1503, the great houses of Stuart and Tudor were united when James IV of Scotland married Margaret Tudor, daughter of King Henry VII of England and sister of future king, Henry VIII. When their son, James V, was born in 1512, the House of Stuart was brought into the line of descent of the House of Tudor and the English throne and when Queen Elizabeth I, the virgin Queen and last Tudor monarch, died childless in 1603, James VI of Scotland ascended to the English throne.

Despite a shared monarch, the three nations retained separate governments, churches and institutions, and ideological and cultural differences continued to fester. From 1639 to 1653 the Wars of the Three Kingdoms took place between Scotland, England and Ireland as the three nations fought over governance and religion. The first conflict is known as the Bishops' Wars which arose when Charles I attempted to impose uniformed sanctions on the Church of Scotland (kirk) and the Church of England in 1637. This angered the majority of Scots who supported the Presbyterian church governed by ministers and elders and in 1638 the National Covenant was signed in opposition to the king's supposed reforms. The Covenanters went on to rule Scotland from 1640 - 1660, briefly occupying northern England. Perhaps the most famous conflict, however, was the English Civil War, fought between the Royalists (Cavaliers) and Parliamentarians (Roundheads) over who had ultimate political control, the monarch or parliament. Ultimately, the Royalists were defeated and Charles I captured and executed. His son, Charles II signed a treaty with Scotland in 1649 declaring him King while England entered a period known as the English Commonwealth with the country being a de facto Republic led by Oliver Cromwell. However, Charles spent the

following nine years in exile in France while Cromwell ruled Scotland, England and Ireland as a virtual dictator. On Cromwell's death in 1658 the monarchy was restored and Charles II returned to Britain.

It was the continual connections with the Catholic faith that brought about the eventual downfall of the Stuart dynasty. When James VII and II ascended to the throne following the death of his brother, Charles II, he was met with widespread support despite his Catholic faith. However, when he proposed a programme of religious tolerance for not only Catholics but Protestant dissenters, the Presbyterian and Anglican establishments were deeply offended. The Glorious Revolution deposed James in favour of his protestant brother-in-law, William of Orange, and his daughter Mary, who ruled until the former's death in 1702. Mary's sister, Anne, subsequently took the crown and in May 1707, under the Acts of Union, Scotland and England were united into one kingdom with a shared parliament, known as Great Britain. Sadly despite 17 pregnancies Anne died without surviving issue, thus ending the Stuart dynasty. Anne was succeeded by her second cousin George I of the House of Hanover, as a result of the Act of Settlement 1701 forbidding a Catholic from taking the throne. It is said that he could not speak English.

The next fifty decades bore witness to several attempts to overthrow the Hanoverians, first by Anne's Catholic half-brother, James Francis Edward Stuart (known as James VIII and III by his supporters and "the Pretender" by his opponents) and then by his son Charles Edward Stuart (Bonnie Prince Charlie or "the Young Pretender").

Image 1: King Robert II; Image 2: King James VI and I; Image 3: King Charles I
Image 4: Queen Anne

Image 1:

Image 2:

Image 3:

Image 4:


ANNE