

JACOB ABBOTT



**CHARLES
THE FIRST**

Jacob Abbott

Charles the First

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Bryce Emerson

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Introduction

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In *Charles the First*, Jacob Abbott traces how a monarch's conviction in sacred authority collides with a nation's rising demand for accountable government, revealing the fragile hinge on which personal conscience, religious certainty, fiscal necessity, and the evolving machinery of law turn, as courtly splendor meets provincial impatience, counsel yields to resolve, ceremony shadows strategy, and the hum of petitions swells into a contest of principles whose outcome will redefine the bonds between ruler and ruled, not through abstract theory alone but through the choices, misread signals, and limited options that accumulate when tradition strains against unprecedented pressures.

Charles the First is a work of narrative history and biography from the mid-nineteenth century, part of Jacob Abbott's *Makers of History* series. Set chiefly in early seventeenth-century England and the wider kingdoms ruled by the Stuart crown, it presents the court, councils, and towns in which policy and personality converged. Abbott writes for general readers, organizing political and domestic scenes into a clear chronological account. Published in an era when popular history sought to instruct as well as entertain, the book distills complex constitutional change into graspable episodes without technical apparatus, aligning it with accessible histories that introduced broad audiences to pivotal figures.

The premise is straightforward: a young prince becomes king and must learn to govern amid fiscal strain, religious contention, and changing expectations of Parliament and prerogative. Abbott begins with family background and education, then follows early decisions of the reign as they shape relationships with advisers, rivals, and subjects. The voice is composed and explanatory, preferring lucid narrative to polemic, and the tone is reflective without obscurity. Readers encounter scenes, customs, and dilemmas described in compact chapters that move steadily toward crisis while withholding sensationalism, creating a balanced, steady-paced experience that foregrounds causes, perceptions, and constraints rather than retrospective judgment.

Power and principle anchor the book's themes. Abbott examines how legitimacy is asserted, tested, and negotiated; how conscience interacts with public duty; and how religious commitment colors policy in an age when theology and sovereignty were intertwined. He shows the uses and limits of spectacle, the burdens of secrecy and counsel, and the ways money enforces reality upon ideals. By threading personal habit through institutional conflict, the narrative illuminates how temperament influences statecraft, and how competing conceptions of law—customary, statutory, and royal—shape events. The result is a study of leadership under pressure, attentive to both moral intention and structural constraint.

For contemporary readers, the book's questions feel immediate: What restrains executive power, and what emboldens it? When does compromise preserve principle,

and when does it dissolve it? How do polarized beliefs transform routine procedures into existential tests? Abbott's portrait invites consideration of transparency, legitimacy, and the rhetoric of emergency that accompanies demanding times. By tracing incremental escalations, the narrative encourages attention to process rather than spectacle, reminding us that constitutional stability depends on trust as much as text. In an era of contested authority and ceaseless media, the dynamics he describes—interpretation, representation, and accountability—retain instructive force.

Abbott's style favors clarity over controversy, making the book a useful bridge between primary chronicles and modern scholarship. Readers unfamiliar with Stuart politics will find the explanations of offices, ceremonies, and regional tensions sufficient to follow the stakes, while those who know the broad outline can appreciate the measured pacing and careful linkage of cause and effect. The prose avoids jargon, offering definitions by context and pausing to clarify motives without overconfidence. This approach sustains engagement while respecting complexity, allowing the drama to emerge from documented pressures and decisions rather than from dramatic embellishment or anachronistic certainty.

To approach Charles the First through Abbott is to witness a formative constitutional struggle framed by human fallibility and resolve, conveyed in an accessible, steady narrative that neither excuses nor caricatures. The book endures because it supplies a clear path into a difficult subject, equips readers to ask better questions about power

and law, and invites reflection on leadership in constrained circumstances. Suitable for classrooms, reading groups, or independent study, it rewards patience with cumulative insight, directing attention to the choices that define an office as much as a life, and to the enduring tension between authority and consent.

Synopsis

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Jacob Abbott's *Charles the First*, part of his nineteenth-century *Makers of History* series, introduces the Stuart monarch against the backdrop of a recently unified English and Scottish crown. Born in 1600 to James I and Anne of Denmark, Charles grew from a frail, reserved child into heir apparent after his elder brother's death. Abbott sketches the courtly world that formed the prince's tastes, piety, and sense of royal dignity, noting his close dependence on family and counselors. The opening chapters frame the central tension between inherited prerogative and emerging constitutional limits, preparing readers for a life narrative where personality and institution continually test each other.

Abbott recounts Charles's difficult path to marriage and alliances, beginning with the ill-fated journey to Spain in pursuit of a royal match. Guided by the powerful favorite George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, the venture reveals the prince's romantic impulsiveness and the hazards of diplomacy amid confessional rivalries. After the failure in Madrid, Charles marries the French Catholic princess Henrietta Maria, introducing new religious sensitivities at court. The author traces household tensions, ceremonial tastes, and the influence of advisors that would shape early policy. These scenes elucidate how private attachments and public expectations intertwined, foreshadowing strains between royal will, counsel, and national sentiment.

Ascending the throne in 1625, Charles confronts immediate fiscal and military pressures as wars with Spain and France demand funds. Abbott follows his early parliaments, where disputes over taxation, customs revenues, and accountability harden into constitutional confrontation. The narrative outlines the Petition of Right and the rancor surrounding Buckingham, whose influence and martial failures inflame distrust until a sudden change alters court dynamics. Abbott emphasizes how mismatched expectations—Parliament's insistence on safeguards and the king's belief in undivided authority—produce recurrent impasses. Episodes of forced loans and contested duties illustrate a widening gap between prerogative practice and subjects' claims to the security of law.

With Parliament dismissed, the king embarks on years of personal rule, a period Abbott depicts through fiscal expedients and religious policy. Levies such as ship money, enforced through compliant courts, raise revenue while stirring principled resistance. Under Archbishop Laud, efforts at ceremonial uniformity and discipline alienate many, especially Puritans. The book narrates the attempt to impose a prayer book on Scotland, the resistance that follows, and the costly Bishops' Wars that expose the limits of royal finance and administration. These chapters show how governance by decree, even when orderly, accumulates grievances that ultimately compel the crown to seek parliamentary remedies.

Calling first a brief and fruitless assembly and then a sitting that endures, Charles faces an agenda of redress rather than subsidy. Abbott details measures that dismantle

instruments of arbitrary power, constrain the executive, and scrutinize royal counselors, setting a new constitutional landscape. News from Ireland heightens alarm, and arguments over command of militia and fortifications become decisive. A dramatic personal intervention in the Commons deepens mistrust and turns a constitutional struggle toward preparations for arms. Without dwelling on procedural minutiae, the narrative conveys how fear, rumor, and principle converge to harden choices on both sides of the emerging divide.

As civil war begins, Abbott traces the organization, resources, and early movements of both camps rather than dwelling on battlefield spectacle. He notes the king's reliance on traditional loyalties and the advantages Parliament draws from the navy, taxation, and urban support. Campaigns open indecisively before more systematic discipline and leadership reshape the conflict, culminating in a reformed parliamentary army that changes the war's tempo. The text profiles regional theaters, the pressures on civilians, and the political stakes attached to military success, emphasizing that victory for either side would determine not only offices and policies, but the underlying frame of English governance.

Late chapters follow negotiations, custody, and the fracturing of alliances among royalists, parliamentarians, Scots, and a politicized army, as competing visions of settlement collide. Abbott presents Charles as steadfast in conscience and rank, yet often misjudging times and tempers, a portrait set against institutions straining toward an uncertain constitutional future. The story advances to a

grave crisis that redefines authority and allegiance, but the account's emphasis remains on causes and consequences rather than sensational turns. By grounding a turbulent era in character, policy, and law, the book offers a durable lens on sovereignty, liberty, and the origins of modern British statecraft.

Historical Context

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The narrative unfolds in the early seventeenth century, when the Stuart dynasty ruled the three kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland. After the 1603 union of the crowns under James VI and I, institutions inherited by Charles included a bicameral Parliament, the common law courts, and prerogative bodies like Star Chamber and High Commission. The established Church of England upheld episcopal governance and royal supremacy, while Scotland maintained a Presbyterian tradition with periodic royal pressure for conformity. European affairs—especially the Thirty Years' War—shaped diplomacy and finance. Within this framework, Charles I's reign (1625-1649) tested balances among monarchy, Parliament, church, and local gentry.

Charles was born in 1600, the second son of James VI and I and Anne of Denmark. He became heir in 1612 after his brother Henry's death and was created Prince of Wales in 1616. His education emphasized piety, ceremony, and the dignity of kingship, aligning with doctrines of divine right current at the Stuart court. In 1625 he married Henrietta Maria of France, a Roman Catholic princess, a union negotiated for dynastic and diplomatic reasons. Court culture favored the arts and Arminian-leaning clergy, notably William Laud, whose advocacy of uniform worship and episcopal authority later influenced Charles's religious policies.

War and money framed the king's first parliaments. Costly and unsuccessful expeditions against Spain and France—organized by the royal favorite, the Duke of Buckingham—strained revenues and goodwill. Parliament resisted new impositions, protested arbitrary imprisonment, and pressed grievances alongside subsidies. The Petition of Right (1628) affirmed that taxation required parliamentary consent and condemned unlawful detentions and martial law. Buckingham's assassination in 1628 removed a lightning rod but not the underlying disputes. Tensions over customs duties, tonnage and poundage, and religious direction persisted, shaping Charles's view that Parliament endangered royal authority and the uniformity he favored within the national church.

In 1629 Charles dissolved Parliament and began an eleven-year Personal Rule, governing through prerogative and council. He raised revenue without parliamentary grants through ship money, monopolies, compositions for knighthood, and forest fines. The Star Chamber and High Commission enforced policy, while Archbishop Laud advanced ceremonial reforms, strict discipline for clergy, and closer conformity. Resistance appeared in legal challenges, notably John Hampden's ship money case (1637), and in broader Puritan discontent. Many English Protestants emigrated to New England during the 1630s. Attempts to impose a new prayer book in Scotland in 1637 sparked protests that soon grew into organized national opposition.

Scottish resistance culminated in the Bishops' Wars (1639–1640), compelling Charles to seek funds he could not

raise alone. The Short Parliament met in April 1640 and was dissolved within weeks; military setbacks forced the summoning of the Long Parliament in November. Parliament abolished Star Chamber and High Commission, enacted the Triennial Act, and prosecuted leading royal advisers, including Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, executed in 1641. The Irish rebellion of 1641 intensified disputes over control of the army. Relations collapsed after the king's failed attempt to arrest five members in January 1642, as both sides prepared for armed confrontation.

Civil war began in 1642 when Charles raised his standard at Nottingham, asserting the royal right to command the militia against Parliament's Militia Ordinance. Early campaigns were indecisive, but the conflict widened. Parliament allied with Scottish Covenanters under the Solemn League and Covenant (1643), and in 1645 organized the New Model Army, a centralized force under disciplined command. Military success shifted with key defeats for the royalists, including at Naseby (1645), which undermined the king's capacity to wage war. Alongside campaigning, negotiations over church settlement, taxation, and the limits of prerogative revealed deeply divergent constitutional expectations.

Charles's captivity did not end the crisis. Disputes among Parliament, the army, and Scottish allies produced the Second Civil War (1648). After Pride's Purge removed many MPs, the remaining Commons established a High Court of Justice to try the king for treason against the realm. Charles was convicted and executed on 30 January 1649. Parliament abolished the monarchy and the House of Lords and

proclaimed a commonwealth. These outcomes arose from unresolved questions about sovereignty, representation, and church governance that had defined the preceding decades, and they framed the dramatic closing chapters that any account of his reign must address.

Jacob Abbott (1803–1879), an American educator and prolific writer for young readers, published *Charles the First* in the mid-nineteenth century as part of his *Makers of History* series. The series presented accessible narratives foregrounding character, moral choices, and clear causation. Abbott's treatment reflects a common Anglo-American reading of the Stuart crisis that emphasizes constitutional conflict, religious uniformity debates, and the practical limits of royal prerogative. By distilling complex proceedings into vivid episodes and institutional milestones, he underscores how legal and ecclesiastical structures constrained rulers. The book thus mirrors contemporary interest in parliamentary government while offering cautionary lessons about absolutist impulses.

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King Charles I. Portrait by van Dyck.

PREFACE

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THE history of the life of every individual who has, for any reason, attracted extensively the attention of mankind, has been written in a great variety of ways by a multitude of authors, and persons sometimes wonder why we should have so many different accounts of the same thing. The reason is, that each one of these accounts is intended for a different set of readers, who read with ideas and purposes widely dissimilar from each other. Among the twenty millions of people in the United States, there are perhaps two millions, between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, who wish to become acquainted, in general, with the leading events in the history of the Old World, and of ancient times, but who, coming upon the stage in this land and at this period, have ideas and conceptions so widely different from those of other nations and of other times, that a mere republication of existing accounts is not what they require. The story must be told expressly for them. The things that are to be explained, the points that are to be brought out, the comparative degree of prominence to be given to the various particulars, will all be different, on account of the difference in the situation, the ideas, and the objects of these new readers, compared with those of the various other classes of readers which former authors have had in view. It is for this reason, and with this view, that the present series of historical narratives is presented to the public. The author, having had some opportunity to become acquainted with the position, the ideas, and the intellectual

wants of those whom he addresses, presents the result of his labors to them, with the hope that it may be found successful in accomplishing its design.



The Tower of London. Engraving by Daniel Havell (1785-1826).

I. — CHARLES'S CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

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1600-1622

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KING CHARLES THE FIRST was born in Scotland[1q]. It may perhaps surprise the reader that an English king should be born in Scotland. The explanation is this:

They who have read the history of Mary Queen of Scots, will remember that it was the great end and aim of her life to unite the crowns of England and Scotland in her own

family. Queen Elizabeth was then Queen of England. She lived and died unmarried. Queen Mary and a young man named Lord Darnley[1] were the next heirs. It was uncertain which of the two had the strongest claim. To prevent a dispute, by uniting these claims, Mary made Darnley her husband. They had a son, who, after the death of his father and mother, was acknowledged to be the heir to the British throne, whenever Elizabeth's life should end. In the mean time he remained King of Scotland. His name was James. He married a princess of Denmark; and his child, who afterward was King Charles the First of England, was born before he left his native realm.

King Charles's mother was, as has been already said, a princess of Denmark. Her name was Anne. The circumstances of her marriage to King James were quite extraordinary, and attracted great attention at the time. It is, in some sense, a matter of principle among kings and queens, that they must only marry persons of royal rank, like themselves; and as they have very little opportunity of visiting each other, residing as they do in such distant capitals, they generally choose their consorts by the reports which come to them of the person and character of the different candidates. The choice, too, is very much influenced by political considerations, and is always more or less embarrassed by negotiations with other courts, whose ministers make objections to this or that alliance, on account of its supposed interference with some of their own political schemes.



Portrait of John Hampden.

As it is very inconvenient, moreover, for a king to leave his dominions, the marriage ceremony is usually performed at the court where the bride resides, without the presence of the bridegroom, he sending an ambassador to act as his representative. This is called being married by proxy^[2]. The bride then comes to her royal husband's dominions,

accompanied by a great escort. He meets her usually on the frontiers; and there she sees him for the first time, after having been married to him some weeks by proxy. It is true, indeed, that she has generally seen his *picture*, that being usually sent to her before the marriage contract is made. This, however, is not a matter of much consequence, as the personal predilections of a princess have generally very little to do with the question of her marriage.

Now King James had concluded to propose for the oldest daughter of the King of Denmark and he entered into negotiations for this purpose. This plan, however, did not please the government of England, and Elizabeth, who was then the English queen, managed so to embarrass and interfere with the scheme, that the King of Denmark gave his daughter to another claimant. James was a man of very mild and quiet temperament, easily counteracted and thwarted in his plans; but this disappointment aroused his energies, and he sent a splendid embassy into Denmark to demand the king's second daughter, whose name was Anne. He prosecuted this suit so vigorously that the marriage articles were soon agreed to and signed. Anne embarked and set sail for Scotland. The king remained there, waiting for her arrival with great impatience. At length, instead of his bride, the news came that the fleet in which Anne had sailed had been dispersed and driven back by a storm, and that Anne herself had landed on the coast of Norway.

James immediately conceived the design of going himself in pursuit of her. But knowing very well that all his ministers and the officers of his government would make endless objections to his going out of the country on such an errand,