Cardinal Henry Benedict

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The exiled King James III of England and Ireland, VIII of Scotland - known as the Old Pretender to his enemies, including Britain’s Queen Anne, his elder half-sister - was ejected from France in accordance with a clause in the Treaty of Utrecht, which concluded the War of the Spanish Succession in 1713. Thus, both of his sons by his Polish queen, Maria Clementina Sobieska, were born in Rome: Charles Edward Stuart in 1720 and Henry Benedict Stuart in 1725. The unhappy little family was ‘centrally situated in ... the dynastic, confessional, diplomatic, political, and military disputes of the early eighteenth century’. Yet Henry Benedict’s long life would witness, and in a sense embody, a shift from palpably medieval inter-dynastic contention to a global battle of ideas between empire and republicanism.

Charles Edward (left) and Henry Benedict in 1732, by Antonio David. Aged seven, the latter was already allowed by the Pope ‘to hold ecclesiastical benefices, offices, or pensions despite his minority’. NPG 434 and 435 ©National Portrait Gallery, London

The Stuart brothers closely resembled each other physically, and both would eventually succeed to their father’s empty titles as Kings of England, Ireland and Scotland. But considered as people, they could hardly have been less alike. Charles will be associated forever with a failed but romantic military thrust at the heart of the Hanoverian establishment, after which ‘[for] the rest of his life, pathetically, all went downhill’. Whereas Henry, a beatific, abstemious, wealthy, celibate aesthete who lived to a great age ‘inoffensive and respectable’ to the end, at the last made peace with King George III, nephew of the Stuarts’ military nemesis, William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland. Indeed, it was very likely as an indirect result of the improbable lack of enmity between George III and his Continental Catholic shadow, by then styled Henry IX, that the latter’s papers came to rest at Windsor rather than in the Vatican.

Entries for ‘Musica e Feste’ in the 1745-c.1751 household account book of Cardinal York, RA SP/M/40/4

All of which raises a seminal question: how seriously did Cardinal Henry Benedict take his successive roles as Duke of York, heir-presumptive to Charles III, and King Henry IX? Historical opinion about this, as indeed about many of the most basic facts of Henry Benedict’s life, is sharply divided.

The numismatic evidence is mixed. Medals by F. Cropanese struck in 1776 bearing Henry Benedict’s bust on one side and a figure of Religion with a cardinal’s hat and English crown at her feet on the other, bore his titles in the order ‘bishop of Tuscany, Cardinal, Duke of York, Vice-Chancellor of the Sacred Church of Ravenna’. Twelve years later, a very similar medal by Cropanese and G. Hamerani styled him ‘Henry
IX., King of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, Cardinal, Bishop of Tuscany. By itself, this change would imply a growing seriousness of purpose vis-a-vis the sitter’s royal as opposed to priestly responsibilities. Yet, both versions bore the motto ‘Non desideriis hominum sed voluntate Dei’ (Not by the desires of men, but by the will of God): adopted, one suspects, to broadcast Henry Benedict’s feelings that his priestly calling was no more escapable than his royal birth, and that the desirability and undesirability of either of these things in the eyes of man were equally irrelevant.

His angry response to being passed over as Duke of Albany in favour of his illegitimate niece in 1783 is likewise rich with ambiguity. In his Church career, certainly, Henry Benedict never seems to have turned down a promotion or a chance to augment his already large income, so the Albany controversy could easily have been motivated simply by his urge to preserve an impressive title he felt was his by right. But this could have been mingled with an equally powerful moral urge to deny it to a young woman he felt was unworthy of it, by dint of her mother’s relatively low birth and the immoral circumstances of her own. In this context, it is worth mentioning that the present digitisation contains a 180-word memorandum in French detailing Henry Benedict’s notorious decision to refuse to execute the Duchess of Albany’s 1789 will in favour of her mother, Clementina Walkinshaw (referred to in the Stuart Papers after c.1770 by variously spelled versions of her Imperial title, Grafin Albestroff) unless the latter renounced, ‘any right or pretention to the aforesaid inheritance and testament, no matter in what way it may present itself’, in her own name and on behalf of her heirs.

In the 1745-6 rebellion that saw his brother lead a Jacobite army as far south as Derby, Henry Benedict - not yet a cardinal or priest - was placed in nominal command of a French fleet poised to invade England from the south; and this is the probable context of the portrait of him in armour, long misidentified as being of Charles Edward, by Maurice Quentin de la Tour. Some four years after he was ordained, moreover, Henry Benedict’s enthusiasm for his brother’s invasion attempt apparently remained undimmed, for it was at his behest that Giulio Cesare Cordara SJ penned Expeditio in Scotiam, the Latin account of it that was eventually printed in English translation by the Scottish History Society under the title Commentary on the Expedition to Scotland Made by Charles Edward Stuart, Prince of Wales. Yet this foray into Jacobite propaganda was uncharacteristic. After 1746, Henry Benedict never seems to have served as patron (financial or otherwise) or leader (however nominal) of any Jacobite military unit, and he continued to refer to himself as Duke of York long after he also began referring to himself as King. He ‘was deeply hurt when, in 1789, against the background of the French Revolution, the pope decided to recognize George III as king of Britain, and six years later was still signing some of his correspondence ‘Henry R’. However, by 1800 he had largely stopped doing so, and when Great Britain and Ireland became the United Kingdom on 1 January 1801, his household arrangements apparently made no effort either to mirror this development or overtly to reject it. In fairness, however, incursions into Italy by the armies of the French Republic, culminating in their abolition of the Papal States in February 1798, meant that Henry Benedict spent much of the period in question as an impoverished refugee, and he gladly accepted an annual pension of £4,000 from George III in
February 1800 - though this may only have offset the losses the Cardinal King had sustained in funding the allied war effort out of his personal fortune. Perhaps most significantly, Henry Benedict never sought to be released from his cardinalate or his priestly vows, unlike fellow royals who had found themselves in parallel situations, such as Henry the Chaste of Portugal [r. 1578-80] and John II Casimir of Poland [r. 1648-68]. On the whole, one is tempted to conclude that his enthusiasm for the Stuart claim to the British throne waxed and waned over time - just as it did among rank-and-file Jacobites.

For three main reasons, we should probably reject arguments that Henry Benedict’s ordination as a Catholic priest in 1748, fourteen months after he became a cardinal, ‘dealt the final wound to the Stuart cause’. First, if the core of this issue was mistrust of the Stuart claimants among the Protestant majority of British Jacobites, then the fatal turning point would surely have been the 1719 marriage of the Old Pretender to Maria Sobieska: ‘notably pious ... granddaughter of the Church’s champion against the Infidel and the god-daughter of Pope Clement XI.’ Second, Catholic Jacobites (and Scottish Episcopalian ones) who had looked to the Stuarts as the monopole of their hopes for toleration under George II would, in any case, have become conflicted in their loyalty due to the increasingly tolerant religious policies of George III, which stemmed in part from his surprise acquisition of thousands of new Catholic subjects in Quebec in 1763. And third, the real knockout punch to Jacobitism as a threat to the House of Hanover was dealt by Pope Clement XIII in 1766, when he refused to recognise Charles Edward as King Charles III of Great Britain - on the specific grounds that doing so would jeopardise the new policy of toleration towards Catholicism that was operating both in Britain and in British North America. This withdrawal of papal support may also have been influenced by Bonnie Prince Charlie’s adult conversion to Anglicanism, but in no case by his younger brother’s status as a cardinal-priest. Henry Benedict’s efforts down to 1775 to overturn the Pope’s decision and have his brother recognised as king were so ham-fisted that this writer wonders if they were sincere; and if they were, whether the Cardinal Duke of York was as dimwitted as Amy Cochrane-Baillie, Marchesa Nobili-Vitelleschi, once claimed. The newly digitised letter registers RA SP/M/23-26, written in a bold and clear French hand, are packed with detail of the financial circumstances and dealings of the Stuarts and their supporters in the wilderness years of 1752-61. Based on their contents, it is hard to disagree that in the aftermath of the Jacobites’ defeat at the Battle of Culloden in 1746, the financial boost to the Stuart cause that derived directly from Henry Benedict’s cardinalate was a ‘triumph’ and the family’s, ‘only hope of permanent security’ [even if the ‘£’ in the Stuart Papers often refers to livres...
tournois, which were valued at just 9½d to 20d sterling during Henry Benedict’s lifetime. In this regard, RA SP/M/26, with its numerous, apparently complete transcripts of letters written by Henry Benedict to the Jacobite banker Jean Waters between 1757 and 1760, may prove particularly valuable, as will the cardinal’s cash book for the years 1760-1781 [RA SP/M/40].

Our understanding of the life and character of Henry Benedict Stuart has suffered, perhaps disproportionately, from poor scholarship - both during the period of intense interest in Jacobitism in the quarter-century prior to the First World War, and subsequently, amid the ‘ebbing tide of academic seriousness’ with which the Jacobites were treated until fairly recently. Gale’s digitisation of the Stuart and Cumberland Papers represents an exciting new opportunity for more extensive and rigorous work on this remarkable, enigmatic, epoch-spanning figure.

NOTES


[2] RA SP/Main/80/120. ‘Persons Invited in March 1724 to the Queen’s Labour’, 1725.


[8] Though he cannot have been Cardinal Camerlengo of the Church as a whole, despite the majority of his biographers having claimed that he was: see MacCannell, ‘King Henry IX’, p. 200.

[9] RA SP/M/27/104 (item 576). 26 April 1791. I am grateful to Prof. Juliet MacCannell of the Institute of Modern Languages Research, University of London, for her kind assistance with this and other translations.

[10] Sir Bruce Seton (ed.), ‘Commentary on the Expedition to Scotland made by Charles Edward Stuart, Prince of Wales, by Padre Giulio Cesare Cordara’, in Miscellany of the Scottish History Society, 3rd ser., 9 (Edinburgh, 1926), pp. 4-155. Cordara also wrote ‘a pastoral drama on the death of [Maria] Clementina Sobieska ... which was well received and played all over Italy, and which increased his literary reputation’: Sir Bruce Seton, Bt., editor’s notes, pp. 5–10, quotation at p. 6.


The inverse path was taken by Charles de Bourbon, who remained a cardinal in preference to being crowned King Charles X of France in 1589. Henry Benedict’s Franco-Polish great-grandmother, Marie Casimire Louise de La Grange d’Arquien, had been a lady in waiting to John II’s queen consort.

See MacCannell, ‘King Henry IX’, p. 201.

Cardinals were not required to be priests until 1918, and Reginald Pole, for example, held the former status for nearly two decades before acquiring the latter.

Lipking, ‘Jacobe Plot’, p. 844, who is tentative about it.

Guthrie, ‘Memorial of the Chevalier’, p. 548. For a letter from Pope Clement XI to Clementina, see RA SP/Main/41/54, 13 Jan. 1719, in which he promises to help her during her imprisonment in Innsbruck.


