

The Civil War and the Restoration (1600s)

The historical context (1625-1688)

Charles I ascended the throne in 1625 and tried to impose an absolute monarchy. This provoked the Civil War in 1642. The Puritans, whose leader was Oliver Cromwell, replaced the monarchy with a republic (1650-1658). It had the name of the Commonwealth. When Cromwell died in 1658 nobody was able to succeed him. So the monarchy was restored in 1660. The new king was Charles II, who had been influenced by the French culture. He succeeded in improving English colonization and commerce in the world. He died in 1685. But the new king, James II, who tried to impose the Catholic religion, was deposed in 1688 during the Bloodless Revolution.

The social context.

During the first half of the 1600s there were many religious differences: there were the Non-conformists and the dissenters, the Puritans and the Catholics. The Puritans had a strict style of life and made the London playhouses close in 1642. Cromwell was the leader of the Puritans during the Civil War and the Commonwealth. After the republic Charles II, who loved the French culture, ruled in Britain just like the French king. In that period (1665 - 1666) England was hit by the plague and a fire.

Even if the ~~XVII~~ century was difficult for England, trade developed for this powerful nation both in America and Asia. New colonies were founded by people looking for religious freedom or wealth. An example is represented by the Pilgrim

Fathers, who left England in 1620 and founded new colonies in America. These colonies were strictly controlled by Great Britain, but they will become independent in the future.

The cultural context

The books most read during the XVII century were the Bible and "The Book of Common Prayer". John Bunyan wrote the "Pilgrim's Progress", a book based on the Christianity. Many people still studied the classics since Latin was the language used in political and religious controversy.

The news were sent in newsletters to the subscribers and widespread among the neighbours. The newspapers will appear after the end of the XVII century.

In this period there was also an important scientific interest encouraged

and led to the Scientific Revolution.
Isaac Newton represented the highest point
of the revolution and was the most prestigious
president of the Royal Society.
Literature developed in the form of prose
rather than poetry. Since theatres were
closed in 1642, drama revived only
after the Restoration.

The story of English

English language had a predominance
of Anglo-Saxon words. Church kept
using Latin words.

American English was influenced by
the other languages spoken in America:
'Indian natives' languages, Spanish, French,
Dutch and German.

There were also differences in Britain:
English was spoken in England, Scots in the
Lowlands, Gaelic in the Highlands of Scotland,
Irish in Ireland. This was divided in Irish

English, spoken on the eastern coast of Ireland and Gaelic Irish, spoken by the majority of the common people.

The story of British music.

Before the Puritan rule music could be listen in the churches. When the Puritans destroyed the organs, music could be listened only in private concerts. There could be also plays accompanied by the music. This new kind of performance was called dramatic opera.

When the Stuarts got again the power, concerts became public. Henry Purcell was the most important composer of this period. He composed Dido and Aeneas.

The story of British art.

Before the Commonwealth art had a good widespread; there were important artists such as Rubens (1577-1640) and

Van Dyck (1599-1641). During the Commonwealth and lived a decline. It didn't represent feelings, it was very realistic. Samuel Cooper was the most important painter in this period.

After the Restoration, artists became court gentlemen. They weren't anymore considered simple tradesman like in the Elizabethan Age.

Also architecture developed well in this period. Sir Christopher Wren was the most important architect: he rebuilt many parts of London which had been destroyed during the Great Fire. For example he built Saint Paul's Cathedral.

Poetry in the Puritan Age and in the Period of the Restoration (1625-1688)

The religious and political contrasts in England reduced the poetic output. The masterpiece of this period is in fact an epic poem

based on the fall of Adam and Eve from Eden: its name is Paradise Lost, written by John Milton in 1667. The author was a Puritan and had played an active part in Cromwell's government. In his work of literature he followed the conventions of the epic established by Homer and Virgil in the Classical Age: there are similes, the beginning in "mediis res", etc. The language he used is splendid and describes well both Paradise and Hell. He used also Latin form which will be important in the following poetry.