

The execution of Charles I was unprecedented in British history. Previous monarchs had died in a variety of ways and, within living memory, Mary Queen of Scots had been executed on the orders of her cousin Elizabeth I of England. Elizabeth had been very reluctant to sign the order, largely because she recognised the precedent that was being set. Mary had been executed because she was regarded as an active threat to Elizabeth and England but the charges against Charles were on the basis of him having been regarded as a tyrant. Probably of more significance was that many of the signatories to his death warrant were not even from the aristocracy.

Britain's experiment with Republicanism lasted fewer than a dozen years. During that time, the country had teetered on the edge of dictatorship before slipping into near anarchy. Monarchy had provided the only known form of government, which was shared by the rest of Europe, and it was agreed in Parliament to invite Charles I's son to return as King, but with stronger parliamentary oversight. Included in the understanding was, that for the time was an exceptional act of forbearance, the passing of an Act of Oblivion, which pardoned those who had fought on the Parliamentary side, with the exception of those who had committed certain crimes or who had signed Charles I's death warrant.

*Act of Oblivion* forms the title of Robert Harris's book. It deals with those who were termed regicides, concentrating on two who escaped the wrath of those who aimed to bring them to justice. Most of the characters in the book were historically real, apart from Richard Naylor, who is portrayed as pursuing the two regicides who were the focus of the novel and who had fled to America. Although classified as historical fiction, *Act of Oblivion* could be regarded as a thriller as Edward Whalley and William Goffe seek to avoid capture and execution. In an intriguing element of the plot, Whalley sets about writing a history of the Civil War, which indicates the brutality of the conflict. Brutality was a feature of the age and the descriptions of execution by hanging, drawing and quartering of those regicides who were caught were particularly graphic.

Another feature of the novel was the way in which Robert Harris has succeeded in getting the reader to appreciate how events were seen through the eyes of the participants. Religion was of the utmost importance, particularly to the Puritans, with the Bible the source of guidance. Every situation, however dire, was considered to be God's Will. The return of Charles II, who is portrayed as being particularly dissolute, was regarded by Puritans as a return of the devil. They referred to the Book of Revelation, which describes the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and precursors were seen in the Dutch War, the plague of 1665 and accompanying famine, followed by the Great Fire, each of which led to increasing hope that Charles and the

government would soon be swept away. Subsequent events were to cause the Puritans real disappointment.

Everyone in the group enjoyed reading the book. The ending was considered to be a little melodramatic with a Hollywood-style ride into the sunset, but the descriptions of events made for an exciting read.

September – *I'm not scared* by Niccolò Ammaniti

October – *The Broken House* by Horst Krüger

November – *Two Storm Wood* by Philip Gray