ANARCHY AN EQUATION FOR LESS CHAOS

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A history of crown, land, and extraction in England, Scotland, and Ireland — and what a freer order might look like

Introduction: Power Concentrated, Chaos Multiplied

The title of this essay is a provocation, and it is also a proposition. Anarchy, in its oldest sense, does not mean disorder. It means *an-archia* — without a ruler, without a single head set above the rest. The equation proposed here is simple to state and hard to live by: the more power, land, and wealth are concentrated in a few hereditary hands, the more chaos that concentration produces — war, famine, eviction, rebellion, and the policing needed to hold the whole arrangement together. Spread power out, make it answerable, and the chaos lessens.

That is the thread running through a thousand years of British and Irish history. The peoples of England, Scotland, and Ireland were not exploited by an abstract "system" floating above them. They were exploited, again and again, by a specific institution with a specific address: the Crown, and the landed aristocracy that grew up around it, defended it, and was defended by it in return. Kings and queens did not merely reign over extraction. They ordered it, profited from it, chartered it, and — when it was challenged — sent armies to protect it.

This is not a history of every monarch, good or bad. Individual kings could be personally kind, pious, or reforming, and it made remarkably little difference to the structure. The structure was the point. A hereditary head of state sits atop a hierarchy of land ownership, and land ownership, for most of this history, decided who ate, who voted, who could be evicted, and who could be hanged. Follow the land, follow the tax, follow the famine, and the Crown is never far away.

The story below moves in roughly chronological order, from conquest to the present day. It covers England first, because the Norman Conquest is where the modern pattern begins; Scotland, whose independence was fought for, bargained away, and then punished by clearance; and Ireland, where conquest was longest, harshest, and most complete — and where its consequences, above all the Great Famine, remain the starkest indictment of a system that put rent and export before human life. It ends in the present, with a monarchy that no longer rules by decree but still holds, inherits, and profits — and with the question the title asks: what would less chaos actually require?

1. Conquest: 1066 and the Invention of the English Landlord

Before 1066, England was already a kingdom with a king, taxes, and a landed elite. What the Norman Conquest did was replace that elite almost entirely, at sword-point, and record the theft so thoroughly that historians can still count it.

William of Normandy landed at Hastings, defeated Harold Godwinson, and was crowned William I on Christmas Day 1066. The conquest that followed was not a single battle but a sustained campaign of subjugation. The Harrying of the North in 1069–70 — William's scorched-earth response to rebellion in Yorkshire and the north — killed, starved, or displaced tens of thousands. Chroniclers described a wasteland where survivors ate horses, dogs, and, in the grimmest accounts, each other. Whether every detail is exact matters less than the pattern it establishes at the very start of this story: a foreign king, ruling by conquest, willing to destroy the productive base of a region rather than lose control of it.

Within twenty years, the new order was surveyed and written down. The Domesday Book of 1086 is often praised as an administrative marvel, and it was. It was also an inventory of plunder. It recorded who held every manor, how much it was worth, and what it owed the king. By 1086, barely a handful of English landholders of any size remained. The land had passed to the king, who kept about a fifth for himself, and to roughly 170 Norman barons and the great Norman churchmen who held the rest as tenants-in-chief.[1] The English peasant, meanwhile, remained on the land — now working it for a lord who spoke a different language, answered to a king across the Channel, and could call on royal courts and royal castles to enforce the new arrangement.

Two Norman inventions deserve emphasis, because both outlived the Normans. The first was the castle: not the romantic ruin of later centuries, but a fortified garrison planted in a conquered town — at York, Durham, Chester, Norwich, and dozens of other places — from which a small Norman force could dominate a hostile population. The second was the royal forest. By declaring vast tracts "forest," the king placed them under a separate forest law, enforced by royal foresters with savage penalties for poaching deer or cutting wood. The forest was not primarily about trees. It was about the king

reserving the best hunting — and the best land-use rights — for himself, and criminalising the customary ways ordinary people had fed themselves.

The Conquest also fixed the basic fiscal logic of the English Crown: the king was the greatest landowner, the greatest landlord, and the greatest tax collector, all at once. Royal revenue came from the king's own estates, from feudal dues owed by tenants-in-chief, from fines and fees in royal courts, and from taxes on trade and on the population at large. When the king needed money for war — and Norman and Angevin kings almost always needed money for war — the machinery was already there to squeeze it out of the countryside.

2. Feudal Extraction: Tax, Law, and the Myth of Magna Carta

The centuries after the Conquest are often told as the slow growth of English liberty: Magna Carta in 1215, the rise of Parliament, the common law. There is truth in that story, but it is a liberty that was won, in the first instance, by barons against a king — and the people at the bottom of the hierarchy were largely spectators to a quarrel among their exploiters.

Consider taxation. Medieval kings taxed when they needed to, and they needed to often: to fund wars in France, to pay ransoms (Richard I's ransom in 1194 cost 150,000 marks, an astronomical sum raised by taxing the whole country).[2], to pay for crusades, to build castles. The taxes fell, directly or indirectly, on the peasantry who produced the wealth and on the towns whose trade the Crown licensed and tolled. Tax farming — selling the right to collect a tax to a private contractor who kept what he could extract above the price — made the process more rapacious still. And when the tax was a poll tax, levied per head regardless of wealth, the injustice was impossible to miss. It was the poll taxes of 1377–81, imposed to fund war with France, that helped trigger the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. The rebels marched on London demanding an end to serfdom and to the poll tax. The young Richard II met them, promised redress — and then had their leaders, including Wat Tyler, killed and the promises revoked.[3] The revolt was crushed; serfdom endured for decades more. The pattern — concession promised in a crisis, withdrawn when the crisis passed — would repeat for centuries.

Magna Carta itself deserves a clear-eyed reading. Sealed at Runnymede in 1215 after King John's barons rebelled against his arbitrary taxation and justice, its famous clauses — no free man to be imprisoned or dispossessed "except by the lawful judgment of his equals or by the law of the land" — applied to "free men," a category that excluded the unfree peasantry who made up most of the population. The charter protected baronial property and baronial courts. It was a vital document in the long history of limiting royal power, but it was not a liberation of the English people. It was a settlement between the king and his largest landlords about how the spoils would be divided and how far the king could go in taking from them. The peasants who worked the barons' land got nothing from it.[4]

The law, meanwhile, was an instrument of extraction in its own right. The royal courts charged fees. The game laws criminalised hunting on land the poor had once used freely. Enclosure — the fencing off of common land for private, usually sheep, farming — began in the late medieval period and accelerated for centuries. Each enclosure took away a common right — to graze, to gather firewood, to glean — and turned it into a landlord's private income. By the time the process peaked in the eighteenth century, millions of acres of common land had been enclosed by acts of Parliament, a Parliament dominated by the very landowners who benefited. The Crown did not invent enclosure, but the Crown, the aristocracy, and Parliament were one interlocking interest: the king's ministers were landlords, the landlords sat in Parliament, and Parliament legislated for landlords.

Rebellion was answered with exemplary violence. The Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536, a northern rising against Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries and his religious changes, ended with its leaders hanged, drawn, and quartered, and their bodies displayed. The monasteries themselves — great landowners in their own right — were dissolved between 1536 and 1541, and their lands, roughly a quarter to a third of the cultivated land of England, were sold or granted by the Crown to the king's favourites and supporters. This was the largest transfer of land in England since the Conquest, and it created a new class of gentry whose wealth came directly from royal favour.[5] It also destroyed a system, however imperfect, in which monasteries had provided alms, hospitality, and some care for the poor. The Crown took the land; the poor lost the charity.

3. Scotland: Independence Bargained Away, Then Cleared

Scotland's relationship with the English Crown was, for centuries, a war for survival. Edward I's attempt to subjugate Scotland in the 1290s and 1300s — the Wars of Scottish Independence — brought invasion, occupation, and atrocity, answered by William Wallace's victory at Stirling Bridge in 1297, his execution in London in 1305, and Robert the Bruce's victory at Bannockburn in 1314.[6] Scotland kept its independence, its own parliament, its own law, and its own church. But the pressure never stopped. It changed form.

The Union of the Crowns in 1603 — when James VI of Scotland inherited the English throne as James I — put one king over two kingdoms. The Union of the Parliaments in 1707 went further: Scotland's parliament was dissolved, and Scotland was absorbed into the new Kingdom of Great Britain. The union was not, in any meaningful sense, agreed by the Scottish people. It was negotiated by commissioners, pushed through the Scottish Parliament with a mixture of argument, bribery, and economic pressure — the famous "bought and sold for English gold," in Robert Burns's later phrase — and it followed the disastrous Darien scheme, Scotland's failed colonial venture in Panama, which had ruined many Scottish investors and left the country financially exposed.[7] After 1707, Scotland's taxes, trade, and foreign policy were decided in London.

The price of resistance after the Union was demonstrated with terrible clarity after the Jacobite rising of 1745. The defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie's army at Culloden in April 1746 was followed not by reconciliation but by a campaign of pacification: the wearing of Highland dress was banned, the clan system was dismantled by law, Highland chiefs were stripped of their hereditary jurisdictions, and the Highlands were garrisoned by forts and roads built for military occupation. The Dress Act, the Heritable Jurisdictions Act, and the presence of redcoats in the glens were not incidental.[8] They were the Crown's answer to a people who had repeatedly refused to be governed from London.

What followed, across the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was the Highland Clearances — a slow, grinding expulsion of tenants from their land so that landlords could replace them with sheep, which paid better rent, and later with deer forests for sport. The Clearances were carried out by landlords, not by the Crown directly. But they were made possible by the legal order the Crown had imposed after Culloden: chiefs had become landlords with absolute property rights over land their clans had once held in common; the law enforced eviction; soldiers and police were available to carry it out when tenants resisted. At places like Strathnaver and Sutherland, families were turned out of their homes, their houses burned to prevent return, and the people shipped to the coast, to the cities, or to emigrant ships for Canada and Australia.[9] The population of the Highlands fell; the sheep and the deer remained.

The Lowlands, meanwhile, were absorbed into Britain's industrial economy — coal, iron, shipbuilding on the Clyde — where Scottish workers produced immense wealth under conditions of dangerous work, low wages, and company housing. Scotland contributed soldiers, sailors, engineers, and administrators to the British Empire in disproportionate numbers, and it also contributed, in disproportionate numbers, the emigrants the empire and the clearances displaced. The bargain of Union, as experienced by ordinary Scots, was this: their country would be governed from London, their land could be cleared for profit, their labour would build ships and empires, and their say in the matter would be, for two centuries, minimal.

4. Ireland: Plantation, Penal Law, and Famine

If the English story is conquest followed by slow incorporation, and the Scottish story is independence followed by union and clearance, the Irish story is conquest without incorporation — centuries of rule by a minority, backed by the Crown, over a majority that was legally disabled for being the wrong religion and the wrong ethnicity.

English involvement began in the twelfth century, but the systematic conquest came under the Tudors and Stuarts. Henry VIII declared himself King of Ireland in 1541. Under Elizabeth I, rebellion in Ireland was crushed with a ferocity that shocked even some English observers — the Desmond Rebellions and the Nine Years' War ended with famine used deliberately as a weapon, and with the Flight of the Earls in 1607. The Ulster Plantation that followed confiscated the lands of the defeated Gaelic lords and settled them with Protestant planters from England and Scotland. The message was plain:

the land belonged to those loyal to the Crown and to the established church, and loyalty would be rewarded with other people's land.

The seventeenth century made the pattern permanent. The Confederate Wars and Cromwell's campaign of 1649–53 brought mass killing, mass confiscation, and the transplantation of Catholic landowners to Connacht under the slogan "to hell or to Connacht." By the end of the century, after the Williamite War and the Treaty of Limerick (1691) — whose promises of religious toleration were swiftly broken — Catholic ownership of Irish land had fallen from roughly 60 per cent in 1641 to around 14 per cent by 1700, and it would fall further still. The Penal Laws, enacted through the early eighteenth century, completed the legal exclusion: Catholics could not sit in Parliament, hold public office, serve as officers, own a horse worth more than five pounds, or — most importantly — pass their land intact to a single heir. Catholic estates were compulsorily divided among sons, fragmenting them into unviability. The laws were designed, quite openly, to break the Catholic landed class and keep political power in Protestant hands.[10]

The system that resulted was one of the most extractive in Europe. Most Irish land was owned by absentee landlords, many of them living in England, and worked by tenant farmers at rack rents, with little security of tenure. Tenants could be evicted at will; improvements they made to the land became the landlord's property and the basis for a higher rent. The produce of the land — grain, cattle, butter — was exported to England to pay the rent. The people who grew it lived, overwhelmingly, on the potato, the one crop that could feed a family on a tiny plot of marginal land. It was a system that worked, in the narrow sense that it delivered rent and exports to the landlords and to England, and failed completely in the only sense that matters: it left the people who did the work one failed harvest from starvation.

That harvest failed in 1845, when potato blight arrived from America. It failed again in 1846, 1847, and 1848. The Great Famine — *An Gorta Mór* — killed around one million people and drove another million to emigrate.[11] Ireland, it must be stressed, was not short of food. Throughout the famine years, Ireland continued to export grain, livestock, and butter to Britain under armed guard. The food was there; the people could not afford it, because the economic system — enforced by the Crown's government — prioritised rent and export over feeding the population. The British government, under first Sir Robert Peel and then Lord John Russell, refused to stop the exports, refused to provide adequate relief, and adhered to a doctrine of laissez-faire that treated intervention as a greater evil than mass death. Queen Victoria herself became a symbol of the failure: her reign, her government, and her empire presided over a famine in a constituent part of her own kingdom, while relief was offered as charity and loans, and the workhouses filled with the dying. The popular memory of Victoria — "the Famine Queen" in Irish nationalist tradition — is a harsh judgment, but it captures a real truth: the monarch was the head of the state that chose not to feed Ireland.

The famine's aftermath reshaped Ireland permanently. The population fell from over eight million to about six and a half million by 1851, and it kept falling through emigration for another century. Landlordism survived the famine — indeed, evictions accelerated in its aftermath, as landlords cleared estates of tenants who could not pay. The Land War of the 1870s and 1880s, the Land Acts, and eventually Irish independence in 1922 were, in large part, a long reckoning with this history. But the reckoning came a century late for the million who died, and the partition of Ireland in 1921 left the north under British rule, where the plantation's sectarian geography still shapes politics today.

5. Empire: The Crown as Chartering Power

The exploitation did not stop at the shores of these islands. From the sixteenth century onward, the Crown chartered, licensed, and profited from empire — and the peoples of England, Scotland, and Ireland supplied, in different ways, both the labour of empire and its victims.

The mechanism was the royal charter. The East India Company was chartered by Elizabeth I in 1600; the Royal African Company, which dominated England's slave trade in the late seventeenth century, was chartered by Charles II in 1660, with the king's brother James, Duke of York, as its governor. The company's ships carried hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic. The Crown took its share. The Hudson's Bay Company, chartered in 1670, was granted a vast territory in North America. The Virginia Company, chartered by James I, founded Jamestown. In each case the pattern was

the same: the monarch granted a monopoly to a company or a courtier, the company extracted wealth from colonised land and labour, and the Crown received revenue, influence, and a share of the returns.[12]

The monarchy's own involvement in slavery was direct as well as chartered. Charles II and James II held shares in the Royal African Company. Later monarchs and royal dukes invested in slave-owning enterprises, received income from Caribbean estates, and accepted the wealth that slavery generated into the royal household. This is not a matter of retrospective moralising about attitudes of the time — there were contemporaries, including Quakers and others, who denounced slavery as it happened. It is a matter of record: the Crown was a shareholder in the slave trade.[13]

For ordinary people in Britain and Ireland, empire was a more ambiguous bargain. Scots, as noted, became imperial administrators and soldiers in large numbers; Irishmen filled the ranks of the British Army, often because enlistment was one of the few escapes from rural poverty; English workers made the guns, ships, and textiles that empire required, and bought the sugar, tea, and tobacco that slave labour produced. The profits, however, concentrated at the top: in the great houses built from colonial fortunes, in the City of London, and in the royal palaces. The costs — war, taxation to pay for war, the loss of sons to imperial campaigns — were spread across the population. When Britain's wars of empire required money, it was raised by taxing beer, windows, salt, and the other necessities of ordinary life, while the great landed estates were taxed lightly or not at all.

The nineteenth century brought a new phase. Victoria's reign saw Britain become the workshop of the world and the largest empire in history. In 1877, Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India, a title invented by Benjamin Disraeli's government to flatter the Queen and to dignify British rule over a subcontinent. The British Raj was, at its core, an extraction machine: Indian taxes paid for the British army in India; Indian agriculture was reoriented toward export crops; Indian famines — in 1876–78, in 1896–97, in 1943 in Bengal — were met with the same mixture of neglect, free-market dogma, and export of grain that had been practised in Ireland. The monarchy's role here was symbolic but not trivial: the Crown embodied an empire whose legitimacy depended on the idea that a hereditary monarch in London had a natural right to rule hundreds of millions of people who had never consented to her rule and could not vote her out.[14]

6. Enclosure, Industry, and the Tax Burden at Home

While the empire expanded abroad, the enclosure of England continued at home, and industrialisation added new forms of extraction. The parliamentary enclosures of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries — over 5,000 enclosure acts covering some seven million acres — took the remaining common land and handed it to landowners.[15] The people who lost the commons lost their independence: without a cow on the common or firewood from the waste, a labourer's family depended entirely on wages, and wages were set by the farmers who had enclosed the land. The Speenhamland system of poor relief, which topped up low wages from the parish rates, was a tacit admission that the new order did not pay a living wage — and it was paid for by ratepayers, not by the landlords who had created the problem.

Taxation remained regressive. The window tax (1696–1851) taxed light and air, and the poor bricked up windows to avoid it. Taxes on salt, soap, candles, beer, and tea fell hardest on those who spent the largest share of their income on necessities. The income tax, introduced by Pitt the Younger in 1799 to fund war against France, was in principle a tax on the rich, but the great landed interest fought hard, and largely successfully, to keep land undertaxed relative to other forms of wealth. The Corn Laws (1815–46) kept the price of bread artificially high to protect landowners' rents, and were only repealed after a mass campaign — and after the Irish famine had made their cruelty impossible to ignore.[16]

The monarchy, throughout this period, was not a bystander to the politics of land and tax. The king's ministers were drawn from the landed class; the House of Lords was a chamber of hereditary landowners with a veto over legislation; the Crown's own estates — the Duchy of Lancaster and the Duchy of Cornwall — generated private income for the monarch and the heir, exempt from the scrutiny applied to public funds. The sovereign's wealth was, and remains, a mixture of public and private that has never been fully disentangled: palaces maintained at public expense, art and jewels held in trust but displayed as royal property, and private estates generating millions a year in income that the monarch does not have to account for in the way a public body must.

The nineteenth century also saw the first sustained challenges to this order from below. The Chartists demanded the vote for working men. The trade unions fought for the right to organise. The Irish Land League fought for the "three Fs" — fair rent, fixity of tenure, free sale. Each of these movements was met, at different moments, with repression: Peterloo in 1819, when cavalry charged a peaceful crowd demanding parliamentary reform in Manchester, killing around fifteen people; the transportation of the Tolpuddle Martyrs in 1834 for forming a union; the coercion acts in Ireland. The Crown did not always order these acts directly, but it was in the Crown's name that they were done, by governments the monarch had appointed, under laws the monarch had signed.[17]

7. The Twentieth Century: War, Abdication, and the Reinvention of Monarchy

The twentieth century transformed the monarchy's power without abolishing its privilege. The Parliament Acts of 1911 and 1949 stripped the House of Lords of its veto, after the Lords — the hereditary chamber — tried to block Lloyd George's "People's Budget" of 1909, which proposed taxes on land and high incomes to pay for old-age pensions and dreadnoughts. The crisis was resolved by the threat to create enough new peers to swamp the Lords, and by George V's reluctant agreement to do so. The episode is instructive: the hereditary principle was defended to the last ditch by those who benefited from it, and it yielded only when the alternative was its destruction.[18]

The First World War killed a generation of working men and shattered the empires of Europe — but not the British one. George V, alarmed by the fate of his cousins the Romanovs, changed the royal family's name from Saxe-Coburg and Gotha to Windsor in 1917, a rebranding that disguised its German origins.[19] The war itself was, in part, a war of cousins: the monarchs of Britain and Germany were grandchildren of Victoria, and the Russian tsar was her grandson-in-law, and the alliances and rivalries of the crowned heads of Europe helped drag their peoples into a catastrophe none of them had voted for. The war's costs — in lives, in debt, in taxation — fell overwhelmingly on ordinary people. The monarchy survived; the men who died in the trenches did not vote on whether it should.

The interwar years brought the abdication crisis of 1936, when Edward VIII gave up the throne to marry Wallis Simpson. The episode is usually told as a romance. It is more revealing as a demonstration of the monarchy's priorities: the institution mattered more than the individual, and the individual could be removed when he threatened the institution's standing. The Crown's survival, not the people's welfare, was the non-negotiable.

The Second World War completed the transformation of Britain's relationship with the monarchy. The royal family stayed in London during the Blitz, and that endurance earned genuine affection. But the war also created the conditions for the welfare state, the National Health Service, and a Labour government elected in 1945 on a promise that the sacrifices of war would be repaid by a fairer society. The monarchy adapted to this new order by becoming, above all, a symbol — of continuity, of national unity, of service. The adaptation was brilliantly successful as public relations. It did not, however, involve any surrender of the monarchy's wealth, its estates, or its exemption from the ordinary rules that apply to everyone else. The Crown's private finances remained private. The Duchies continued to generate income. The sovereign continued to be exempt from taxes that everyone else paid, by arrangement rather than by law.

Decolonisation, from Indian independence in 1947 through the independence of African and Caribbean states in the 1960s, ended the empire over which Victoria had been Empress. The monarchy's response was the Commonwealth, a voluntary association of independent states in which the British monarch remained head — a role that allowed the Crown to retain a ceremonial presence in former colonies without the responsibilities of rule. For many in the newly independent states, the Commonwealth was a useful forum; for the monarchy, it was a way of preserving relevance and prestige after the substance of empire had gone. The wealth extracted during empire, however, was not returned. The palaces, the collections, the estates bought with colonial fortunes remained where they were.

8. The Modern Monarchy: Wealth, Secrecy, and the Sovereign Grant

The monarchy that exists today — under Charles III, who succeeded Elizabeth II in 2022 after her seventy-year reign — is constitutional, ceremonial, and, its defenders say, harmless. It does not make laws. It does not command armies. It does

not, in any ordinary sense, govern. The question is whether an institution can be harmless while remaining, by a large margin, the richest and most privileged family in the country.

Consider the money. The Sovereign Grant, which funds the monarch's official duties, is paid from the Treasury as a percentage of the profits of the Crown Estate — the vast portfolio of land, property, and seabed that belongs, in law, to the Crown, not to the monarch personally, but whose revenues have funded the monarchy since George III surrendered them in exchange for the Civil List in 1760. The grant was set at 15 per cent of Crown Estate profits, raised to 25 per cent in 2017 to fund the refurbishment of Buckingham Palace, and in 2023 it stood at over £86 million a year. The Crown Estate itself — worth tens of billions of pounds, including much of London's West End, farmland, and the seabed around Britain, from which offshore wind farms pay rent — is a reminder that the Conquest's land settlement was never undone. The king does not own the Crown Estate, but the Crown Estate exists because kings once owned everything.[20]

Alongside it sit the two Duchies. The Duchy of Lancaster, which provides the monarch with a private income (over £20 million a year in recent accounts), and the Duchy of Cornwall, which provides the heir with a similar private income, are vast landed estates — farmland, commercial property, houses, coastline — held by the monarch and the heir in a legal twilight: they are not private property in the ordinary sense, and they are not public property either. They pay no corporation tax. The monarch and the heir have, historically, paid income tax voluntarily on Duchy income, by arrangement, not by legal obligation. The Duchies have also been shown, in investigative reporting, to charge the NHS, schools, charities, and even the armed forces rent for land and property, and to benefit from legal privileges — such as the right of bona vacantia, the property of people who die without a will or heirs — that no other landowner enjoys.[21]

Then there is secrecy. The monarch's wills are sealed by the courts, unlike those of every other citizen, so the scale of inherited royal wealth cannot be known from public records.[22] The sovereign is exempt from freedom-of-information law. The monarch's consent — "Queen's Consent" and now "King's Consent" — is a parliamentary procedure under which the monarch must be consulted on, and can in principle influence, legislation affecting the Crown's interests, including its private estates. The procedure was for decades barely known to the public. When it was revealed that the Queen's Consent had been sought on hundreds of bills, including laws touching on the Duchy of Cornwall, the Palace's response was that it was a formality. A formality available to one family and no other is still a privilege.[23]

None of this is to say that the modern monarchy rules by decree. It does not. The point is narrower and, in a sense, more damning: an institution founded on conquest and sustained by hereditary privilege has survived the democratic age not by giving up its wealth, but by making its wealth boring — by wrapping it in ceremony, by calling it "the Crown" rather than "the family," and by presenting the monarch as a servant of the people while the people pay for the palaces, the ceremonies, and the security, and the family keeps the estates. The English, Scottish, and Irish peoples are no longer serfs, and they are no longer starving in the numbers of the 1840s. But they still live in a country where the head of state is chosen by birth, where the largest landholdings trace their titles to conquest and royal grant, and where the cost of maintaining the symbol is borne by taxpayers who cannot vote the symbol out.

The land question, in particular, remains unresolved. Britain is one of the most unequal countries in Europe in land ownership: a tiny fraction of the population owns most of the land, and the pattern of ownership still reflects, in broad outline, the settlement imposed after 1066 and extended by plantation, clearance, and enclosure. In Scotland, land reform has become a live political issue — the Land Reform Acts of 2003 and 2016 gave communities rights to buy land, and the debate continues.[24] In England, the question is barely asked. In Ireland, the land question was settled, in the south, by independence and by land purchase; in the north, it remains entangled with the constitutional question. Everywhere, the monarchy sits at the top of a hierarchy of land and privilege that no democratic vote created and no democratic vote has yet dismantled.

9. Resistance: The Counter-History from Below

The history told so far could leave the impression that the peoples of these islands simply endured what was done to them. They did not. At every stage, the exploited resisted — and their resistance is the other half of this story, the half that the equation for less chaos is built on.

The first great English challenge came from the Levellers and the Diggers during the Civil Wars of the 1640s. The Levellers, soldiers and pamphleteers in the parliamentary army, demanded that political power rest on the consent of the people, not on birth or property: "the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he," as Colonel Thomas Rainsborough put it in the Putney Debates of 1647. The Diggers went further. In 1649, Gerrard Winstanley and his followers occupied common land at St George's Hill in Surrey and began digging it, declaring that the earth was "a common treasury for all" and that buying and selling land was theft from the commonwealth. The Council of State sent soldiers to drive them off, and local landlords harassed them until they dispersed. But the Diggers' argument — that the land belongs to those who work it, and that enclosure is the original theft — has never gone away. It runs, like an underground stream, through the whole history that follows.[25]

In Ireland, resistance took the form of secret societies — the Whiteboys, the Ribbonmen, the Defenders — who defended tenants against eviction and against the tithe, the tax that Catholic tenants were forced to pay to the Protestant Church of Ireland. It took the form of Daniel O'Connell's mass movement for Catholic emancipation, which won the vote for Catholics in 1829 by mobilising hundreds of thousands of people who had never been allowed a political voice. And it took the form, finally, of armed rebellion: 1798, 1848, 1867, and 1916. The Easter Rising of 1916 was militarily a failure and politically a turning point; the executions that followed, ordered by a British government in the King's name, turned public opinion, and within six years the Irish Free State existed.[26] The lesson the Crown's defenders drew was that force works until it does not — and that a people determined to govern themselves will, eventually, do so.

In Scotland, resistance after the Union was quieter but persistent: the defence of the Kirk, the defence of Scots law, the Radical War of 1820, and, in the twentieth century, the long campaign for a Scottish parliament, which finally succeeded with devolution in 1999. In England, the Chartists of the 1830s and 1840s gathered millions of signatures demanding the vote, the secret ballot, and the end of property qualifications for MPs. They were refused, and their leaders were imprisoned — but every one of their demands, except the annual parliaments, was eventually granted. The trade unions, the cooperative movement, the suffragettes, the campaigners against the Corn Laws: each of them was told, in its time, that its demands were impossible, dangerous, or absurd. Each of them was, in the end, proved right.[27]

The point of this counter-history is not sentimental. Resistance often failed, and its leaders were often killed, transported, or imprisoned. The point is that the order described in this essay was never natural, never inevitable, and never unchallenged. It had to be enforced — by castles, by clearances, by famine, by law, by soldiers — because people would not accept it willingly. A system that needs that much force to maintain itself is a system in permanent crisis. Less chaos begins with recognising that the resistance was right, and that the order it resisted was the source of the disorder, not the cure for it.

10. The Equation for Less Chaos

If the diagnosis is concentration — of land, of wealth, of unaccountable power — then the equation for less chaos is, in outline, disarmingly simple: disperse power, make it answerable, and stop treating inheritance as a qualification for public office.

First, land. Land is finite, it cannot be made, and its ownership decides who can live where and at what cost. A freer order would tax land on its value, so that holding vast tracts idle or for sport becomes expensive and holding land for housing, farming, or common use becomes cheap. It would extend community rights to buy land, as Scotland has begun to do, to every part of these islands. It would bring the Crown Estate and the Duchies into full public accountability — their accounts published in full, their revenues treated as public money, their special legal privileges abolished. The question is not whether the monarch should be left homeless. It is whether one family should hold, by inheritance, estates and privileges that no citizen could acquire by merit and no voter could remove.

Second, accountability. A head of state who cannot be voted out cannot be held to account, however gracious the individual. The least a democracy can do is remove the exemptions: no sealed wills, no exemption from freedom-of-information law, no consent procedure that lets the Crown vet legislation affecting its own interests. The most it can do is what republics do: choose the head of state, for a fixed term, by election, and let the office be judged on its record. Ireland

did this in 1937 and 1949, and the Irish presidency — a modest, elected, largely ceremonial office — has produced heads of state who are respected precisely because they were chosen, not born.[28] The sky did not fall. The chaos did not increase. If anything, the opposite happened: the removal of the hereditary head removed a source of division and left a symbol that belongs to the people, not to a family.

Third, memory and repair. Less chaos requires an honest accounting of what was done — the conquest, the clearances, the famine, the empire — and a willingness to make repair where repair is possible. That means, at minimum, teaching this history honestly, returning cultural property taken by empire, and directing the wealth that empire and extraction accumulated toward the communities that were harmed. It also means recognising that the peoples of these islands were not only victims of the Crown but also, at different times, its instruments — Scottish soldiers, Irish labourers, English workers — and that the division between peoples was itself a technique of rule: divide and conquer, in the oldest sense, setting the exploited against each other so they would not unite against the exploiter.

Fourth, and most importantly, the everyday practice of anarchy in its original sense: the building of institutions that do not need a ruler. Cooperatives, community land trusts, mutual aid, trade unions, tenants' associations, parish and town councils with real power — the unglamorous machinery by which ordinary people govern themselves without waiting for permission from above. The history in this essay is a history of what happens when that machinery is absent or crushed: the landlord, the tax collector, and the soldier fill the vacuum. The alternative is not disorder. The alternative is order built from below, by people who live with its consequences.

This is the equation, then, stated plainly: less concentration equals less chaos. Where power is shared, it is harder to use it to starve a country, clear a glen, or enclose a common. Where land is held in common or taxed on its value, it is harder to turn it into a private income for a distant owner. Where the head of state is chosen, it is harder to mistake birth for merit. And where people govern themselves, in the small, daily ways that matter, they have less need of a crown to tell them who they are.

Conclusion: A Crown That No Longer Fits

A thousand years ago, a Norman duke landed on an English beach and, within a generation, owned the country. That ownership was never fully undone. It was extended to Scotland by union and to Ireland by plantation, exported to an empire by charter, defended by armies and by law, and finally, in the twentieth century, wrapped in ceremony and presented as heritage. The peoples of England, Scotland, and Ireland paid for it at every stage — in rent, in tax, in eviction, in famine, in war, and in the emigrant ships that carried their children away.

The monarchy today does not cause famine, and it does not order clearances. To say otherwise would be dishonest. But the monarchy is the living symbol of the system that did, and the beneficiary of the wealth that system accumulated. It cannot be separated from that history by a change of name, a rebranding, or a well-judged walkabout. The Crown's wealth is the history, in the form of land, palaces, and portfolios. To keep the Crown while forgetting the history is to keep the profits and discard the bill.

The alternative is not vengeance. It is not the chaos that monarchists have always warned republics and anarchists would bring — indeed, the chaos in this story was overwhelmingly caused by the Crown and its defenders, not by its opponents. The alternative is the quiet, practical work of dispersal: land taxed and shared, power elected and accountable, memory honest and repair attempted, and self-government practised daily. Anarchy, in this sense, is not the absence of order. It is the presence of an order that belongs to everyone, rather than to a family.

The equation is simple. The work is not. But the history in these pages suggests that the work is worth doing — because every time the peoples of these islands have been left to govern themselves, and every time the concentration of power has been loosened, the chaos has lessened. The crown, after a thousand years, no longer fits. It is time to set it down, and to build something that does.

Epilogue: What Would Less Chaos Feel Like?

It is easy to describe a system; it is harder to imagine living in a different one. So it is worth asking, concretely, what less chaos would feel like for an ordinary person in England, Scotland, or Ireland.

It would feel, first, like security in your home. A tenant who cannot be evicted at a landlord's whim, a family that cannot be priced out of its own village by second homes and holiday lets, a community that can buy the land it lives on when the owner decides to sell. The fear that has shadowed ordinary life in these islands for a thousand years — the fear that someone above you can take the roof from over your head — would begin to lift. That fear is not an accident of history. It is the direct, daily product of the land settlement described in this essay, and it will not disappear while that settlement remains intact.

It would feel, second, like a say in the decisions that shape your life. Not the thin say of a vote every few years for a representative who then disappears into a parliament in London, but a real say: in the planning decisions about your town, in the ownership of the energy and water that flow through it, in the running of the school and the hospital. The peoples of these islands have always governed themselves well at the local level — in the parish, the town, the trade, the chapel, the club — whenever they have been allowed to. The chaos has come from above, not from below.

It would feel, third, like an honest relationship with the past. A country that teaches its children that the famine was a natural disaster, or that the clearances were an economic necessity, or that the empire was a gift to the world, is a country that is still being governed by the stories of the people who profited. A country that teaches the truth — that the food was exported while people starved, that families were burned out of their homes for sheep, that the wealth of the palaces was taken from people who never consented — is a country that has begun to free itself. Truth is not revenge. It is the precondition for not repeating the crime.

And it would feel, finally, like the absence of something: the absence of the deference that a hereditary head of state demands from everyone, including those who have never consented to it. No more bowing, no more anthems to a family, no more news bulletins that treat a royal birth or a royal illness as a national event while the births and illnesses of ordinary people go unremarked. A republic is not a colder country. It is a warmer one, because its ceremonies belong to everyone — to the nurse, the teacher, the tenant farmer, the shipbuilder — and not to a single bloodline.

None of this will happen by itself, and none of it will happen quickly. The Crown has survived for a thousand years by adapting, by conceding just enough, just in time, and by persuading each generation that it is a harmless decoration. The history in this essay is the answer to that persuasion. The Crown was never harmless. It was the head of a system that took land, took rent, took lives, and called the result order. Less chaos does not mean no order. It means an order made by the people who live in it, for the people who live in it — and no crown on top.

Notes

1. On the Norman land settlement: after 1066 William kept about a fifth of England's land for himself, about a quarter went to the Church, and the remainder was granted to roughly 170 tenants-in-chief; the Domesday survey of 1086 recorded who held every manor and what it was worth. The Domesday manuscript is held by The National Archives, Kew. See "William the Conqueror and the Feudal System," Spartacus Educational.
2. Richard I's ransom: the Emperor Henry VI demanded 150,000 marks (about £100,000), two to three times the Crown's annual income; it was raised by extraordinary taxation — a levy of a quarter of the value of property, scutage and carucage — and Richard was released on 4 February 1194. See "Richard I of England," Wikipedia.
3. The poll taxes and the Peasants' Revolt: Parliament authorised poll taxes in 1377, 1379 and 1380, the last a flat shilling on every adult over fifteen; the revolt of June 1381 ended with Wat Tyler killed at Smithfield on 15 June and Richard II's promises revoked. See R. B. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1983), summarised in the Middle English Texts Series.
4. Magna Carta, clause 39: "No free man shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions, or outlawed or exiled, or deprived of his standing in any other way, nor will we proceed with force against him, or send

others to do so, except by the lawful judgement of his equals or by the law of the land." "Free men" were a minority; most of the population were unfree villeins who could seek justice only in their lords' courts. See Claire Breay and Julian Harrison, "Magna Carta: An Introduction," British Library.

5. The Dissolution: between 1536 and 1541 Henry VIII dissolved about 800 religious houses; their lands — roughly a quarter of all cultivated land in England — passed to the Crown and were granted or sold on, the largest single transfer of land since the Norman Conquest. See "The Dissolution of the Monasteries".
6. The Wars of Scottish Independence: Wallace's victory at Stirling Bridge (1297), his execution in London (1305) and Bruce's victory at Bannockburn (1314). See Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Wars of Scottish Independence."
7. The Union of 1707 and Darien: the Darien scheme raised about £400,000 — roughly a fifth of Scotland's available capital — and its failure left Scotland financially exposed; the Treaty of Union, in force 1 May 1707, included the "Equivalent" of £398,085 10s., part of which reached Scottish parliamentarians; Burns's line is from "Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation" (1792). See "The Act of Union (1707)"; Christopher A. Whatley, *Bought and Sold for English Gold? Explaining the Union of 1707* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2006).
8. Culloden and the anti-Jacobite legislation: the battle was fought on 16 April 1746; the Act of Proscription (1746) banned Highland dress — the Dress Act, in force 1 August 1747 — and the Heritable Jurisdictions (Scotland) Act 1747 abolished the chiefs' hereditary jurisdictions. See "Culloden — The Battle and Its Legacy".
9. The Highland Clearances: in Strathnaver the Sutherland estate cleared tenants in 1814 (28 families) and 1819 (236 families), burning houses to prevent return — 1819 became known as "the year of the burnings" — to make way for sheep farming. See Strathnaver Museum; "Strathnaver".
10. The Irish land transfer and the Penal Laws: Catholic ownership of Irish land fell from about 60 per cent in 1641 to about 22 per cent by 1685 and 14 per cent after the Williamite War (Treaty of Limerick, 1691), falling to 5 per cent by the later eighteenth century; the Penal Laws barred Catholics from Parliament, public office and the professions, and forced the division of Catholic estates among sons. See S. J. Connolly, *Religion, Law and Power: The Making of Protestant Ireland 1660–1760* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); reviewed in *History Ireland*.
11. The Great Famine: potato blight struck in 1845 and recurred through 1848; about one million people died and about one million emigrated; Ireland continued to export grain, livestock and butter to Britain throughout; the census recorded 8,175,124 people in 1841 and 6,552,385 in 1851. See "Great Famine (Ireland)," Wikipedia; Central Statistics Office Ireland, census data.
12. The chartered companies: the East India Company received its royal charter from Elizabeth I in 1600; the Virginia Company founded Jamestown in 1607; the Hudson's Bay Company was chartered by Charles II in 1670. See "British Empire Timeline," Q-Files.
13. The Royal African Company and the Stuarts: chartered in 1660 (as the Company of Royal Adventurers Trading into Africa), it was governed by James, Duke of York — its largest shareholder — and Charles II was a major shareholder; the company shipped about 100,000 enslaved Africans to the Americas, and more than 200,000 on company ships between 1662 and 1731. See "Royal African Company," Wikipedia; Museum of British Colonialism, "'Crowning the Coloniser': The Stuarts, 1603–1707".
14. Empress of India and the Indian famines: the Royal Titles Act 1876 made Victoria Empress of India, proclaimed at the Delhi Durbar on 1 January 1877; the Great Famine of 1876–78 killed an estimated 5.5 to 10.3 million, further famines followed in 1896–97, and the Bengal Famine of 1943 killed about 3 million. See The Victorian Web, "Social History: Protesting Against the British Raj".
15. Enclosure: between 1604 and 1914 Parliament passed more than 5,000 enclosure acts covering almost 7 million acres — about a fifth of England. See W. E. Tate, *A Domesday of English Enclosure Acts and Awards* (Reading: University of Reading, 1978); Surrey History Centre, "Enclosure maps and awards".
16. Regressive taxation: the window tax was levied from 1696 and abolished in 1851, prompting householders to brick up windows; the Corn Laws (1815–46) kept bread prices high to protect landowners and were repealed in 1846 after the Anti-Corn Law League's campaign; the Speenhamland system (Berkshire, 1795) topped up agricultural wages from the parish rates. See "10 terrible taxes in history," BBC History Magazine / History Extra; Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (1944), on Speenhamland.

17. Peterloo and Tolpuddle: at Peterloo (St Peter's Field, Manchester, 16 August 1819) cavalry charged a crowd of about 60,000 demanding parliamentary reform; 15 to 18 people were killed and 400–700 injured. The six Tolpuddle labourers were convicted on 17 March 1834 of administering unlawful oaths as members of the Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers and sentenced to seven years' transportation to Australia; they were pardoned in 1836. See "Peterloo Massacre," Wikipedia; *History Today*, "The Tolpuddle Martyrs".

18. The Parliament Acts: the House of Lords rejected Lloyd George's "People's Budget" of 1909; the Parliament Act 1911 removed the Lords' power to veto bills (replacing it with a delay of up to two years), and the Parliament Act 1949 reduced the delay to one year. See UK Parliament, "The Parliament Acts".

19. The Windsor name: on 17 July 1917 George V proclaimed that the royal house would be known as Windsor, replacing the German Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. See The Royal Family, "Saxe-Coburg-Gotha".

20. The Sovereign Grant and the Crown Estate: the Grant was 15 per cent of Crown Estate profits, raised to 25 per cent in 2017–18 to fund the reservicing of Buckingham Palace; it stood at £86.3 million in 2023–24. The Crown Estate's profits go to the Treasury; its portfolio includes much of London's West End, farmland and the seabed, from which offshore wind developers pay rent. See *Sovereign Grant Annual Report and Accounts 2023–24*; HM Treasury, "Sovereign Grant recalculated as offshore wind profits rise," 20 July 2023.

21. The Duchies: the Duchy of Lancaster provides the monarch's private income and the Duchy of Cornwall the heir's; neither is a corporation and neither pays corporation tax, though the monarch and the heir pay income tax voluntarily on Duchy income; both benefit from bona vacantia — the property of people who die without a will or heirs in the County Palatine of Lancaster and in Cornwall. The Duchy of Lancaster has charged the NHS rent for its property (about £829,000 a year for ambulance parking). See Duchy of Lancaster, "Frequently Asked Questions"; *The Times*, "Inside the £1bn property empires of King Charles and William".

22. Sealed wills and freedom of information: the wills of senior royals are sealed by the courts — Prince Philip's will was ordered sealed for 90 years in 2021. The Royal Household is not a public authority under the Freedom of Information Acts, and section 37 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 exempts communications with the monarch and the heir. See *The Executors of HRH Prince Philip v Guardian News and Media* [2022] EWCA Civ 1081, Court of Appeal judgment.

23. King's Consent: the monarch's consent must be sought for bills affecting the Crown's prerogatives, hereditary revenues or private estates, including the Duchies; by 2021 more than 1,000 bills had been submitted for Queen's or Prince's Consent. See House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, *The impact of Queen's and Prince's Consent on the legislative process* (2014); *The Guardian*, February 2021.

24. Scottish land reform: the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 established a community right to buy and a crofting community right to buy; the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 extended community rights and created the Scottish Land Commission. See Scottish Government, "Attitudes to land reform: research".

25. The Levellers and the Diggers: at the Putney Debates (October–November 1647) Colonel Thomas Rainsborough said, "I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he"; on 1 April 1649 Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers began digging the common at St George's Hill, Surrey, declaring the earth "a common treasury for all." See "The Levellers & the Diggers".

26. Irish resistance: Daniel O'Connell's campaign won Catholic emancipation in 1829 (Catholic Relief Act); the Easter Rising of 1916 was followed by the execution of fifteen of its leaders, which turned public opinion; the Irish Free State came into being on 6 December 1922. See "Easter Rising," Wikipedia; "Irish Free State," Wikipedia.

27. The Chartists and the Land War: the People's Charter (1838) set out six demands — universal manhood suffrage, the secret ballot, annual parliaments, equal constituencies, payment of MPs, and no property qualification for MPs; by 1918 five of the six had been achieved, annual parliaments excepted. The Irish Land League (founded 1879) campaigned for the "Three Fs" — fair rent, fixity of tenure, free sale — which Gladstone's Land Law (Ireland) Act 1881 partly codified. See UK Parliament, "The Chartist movement"; "The Irish Land War (1879–82)".

28. The Irish presidency: the Constitution of Ireland (Bunreacht na hÉireann) of 1937 created the office of President, and the Republic of Ireland Act 1948 (in force April 1949) declared Ireland a republic with an elected president as head of state. See Constitution of Ireland, 1937; Republic of Ireland Act 1948.