**The Banished Cavaliers**

Born in around 1640, Aphra Behn herself can have possessed only the haziest recollections of the bloody Civil War which had been waged between Charles I and his Parliamentarian opponents during the 1640s. Her famous play, *The Rover*, was first performed in 1677: almost 30 years after the king’s execution at Whitehall and the establishment of an English Republic. Nevertheless, as the play’s alternative title - *The Banished Cavaliers* - immediately suggests, Behn’s text is steeped in allusions to the Civil War, and can only be understood as the product of a society which was still struggling to come to terms with the legacy of that bitterly divisive conflict.

**Who were the Cavaliers?**

The term ‘Cavalier’ was itself a deeply ambiguous one. First adopted into English from the romance languages long before the Civil War began, the word could be used, on the one hand, in a highly positive sense - to refer to a gentleman on horseback, or to a chivalrous military commander - but, on the other hand, in a highly negative sense - to refer to a drunken swaggerer, or a dissolute mercenary soldier. On the eve of the Civil War, Parliament’s supporters in London had begun to apply the partisan label ‘Cavaliers’ to the youthful military men - prominent among them, the violent and quarrelsome Sir Thomas Lunsford - who had rallied to the king. By terming Charles’s most ardent supporters ‘Cavaliers’, the Parliamentarians had sought to imply that the king’s party was made up of reckless, brutal and immoral men, who had no respect for religion, or for English laws and liberties. Yet, once the conflict had begun, many on the king’s side had taken ownership of the term ‘Cavalier’. They had stressed its positive connotations rather than its negative ones, and had boasted, in the words of one Royalist chaplain, that ‘a complete Cavalier is a child of honour: a gentleman well born and bred: that loves his king for conscience sake’.

**Defeat and Exile**

As the Civil War had dragged on - and as the Parliamentarians had gradually assumed the upper hand - so many Royalists had increasingly come to resemble the ‘Cavaliers’ of their enemies’ imaginations, rather than of their own chivalric ideal. Looking back on the conflict many years later, one sorrowful loyalist gentleman was to write that ‘truly, all, or the greatest part of the king’s commanders were so debased by drinking, whoring and swearing, that no man could expect God’s blessing on their actions’. Indeed, some blamed the king’s eventual defeat on divine displeasure at his soldiers’ immoral conduct. With the war at an end, and with Charles in the hands of his enemies, many die-hard Royalists had no choice but to flee into exile abroad, where they spent their time plotting to rescue the king, or - following his execution - to restore his eldest son, Prince Charles, to the throne.

Some of these Royalist exiles found themselves swept into the furthest corners of the earth. Lunsford ended his days in Virginia, for example, while, according to some accounts, Sir Harry Bard - who had served the king at the Battle of Naseby in 1645 - died in India in 1656. Most of the émigré Cavaliers clustered around the courts of Charles I’s exiled wife and eldest son on the Continent, however, and it was here, penniless but principled - or ‘lousy, but loyal’, as Behn was later to put it - that they span out their time, in between embarking on fruitless military ventures, and hoped for better days. Among them were the king’s famous nephew, Prince Rupert, who commanded a Royalist fleet during the late 1640s and early 1650s; the hard-drinking and disputatious Henry Wilmot, who died in the Low Counties in 1658 - and on whom Behn’s ‘Willmore’ may well be partially based; and William Cavendish, Earl of Newcastle, the former leader of the Royalist forces in the North of England.

**After the Restoration**

With the collapse of the English Republic, the restoration of the monarchy and the accession of the late king’s son as Charles II, in 1660, the dreams of the surviving exiles were realised. For many of them, their loyalty to Charles during the time of the crown’s eclipse would now prove to be their passport to wealth and power, rather than the one-way ticket to poverty and oblivion which it had seemed to be over the past sixteen years. The king’s resources were finite, though, and many old Cavaliers failed to receive the rewards which they felt to be their due. While the Restoration ushered in a period in which ex-Royalists would be extravagantly celebrated in prose, verse and drama, moreover - and in which those who had gone into exile with their prince would be toasted as the truest of the true - the ambiguity which had always lain at the heart of the name ‘Cavalier’ would continue to trouble many English folk - and perhaps especially, those, like Behn, who had grown up in the war’s shadow.

Who had been most truly representative of the Cavalier spirit of the 1640s, they wondered? Had it been men of unspotted virtue like Colonel Bevil Grenville, the Cornish Royalist who had been killed at the very moment of triumph at the Battle of Lansdown in 1643 - and whose name appears to be echoed in Behn’s ‘Colonel Belvile’? Or had it been men - like Lunsford and Wilmot - who had fought hard in the king’s cause, but had shown scant regard for propriety and morality while doing so? Or was it even possible to draw a clear-cut line between the two? How one regarded Charles II’s regime depended a good deal upon how one answered these questions about the men who had helped to lay its foundations - and it was with these vexed questions that Aphra Behn was, in part, wrestling as she summoned up the ghosts of the Royalist past on the 1670s stage.

[1,000 words]

*[Mark Stoyle is Professor of early modern History at the University of Southampton]*