

revolt against the march of modern progress. Certainly it can seem sleazier and more self-parodic than its antecedent: McLynn emphasizes the high moral character of many of the Jacobites, whereas in today's populism the grifters are more often in the vanguard — and whatever their faults, the Stuart claim to the throne was much, much more defensible than Trump's claim to have won the 2020 election.

But a serious look at the Jacobite era also suggests the limits of assuming that any political movement is simply predestined for defeat. What defined and ultimately defeated the Stuart cause was poor leadership and truly atrocious luck, including constant problems with the weather — difficulties that might suggest a divine opposition to their project, but hardly manifested any iron law of history or modernity.

There was no plausible world in which the Stuarts could have achieved all of their objectives, assumed all the powers they aspired to hold, or steamrollered the political and religious realities of Parliament or Protestantism.

But given the complexity of their movement and the contingency of their defeats, it's easy enough to imagine a world where that painting in Holyroodhouse depicts a triumphant Great Man of History rather than a doomed pretender, and where a Jacobite restoration — in some no doubt complex form — pushed Britain and modernity onto a meaningfully different path.

In the same way, the often inchoate and self-contradictory goals of contemporary populism cannot all be triumphantly achieved. But that doesn't mean that today's populism will simply and inevitably lose or that our self-doubting, superannuated Whiggism still has history on its side.

Fortune almost favored Charles Edward Stuart. It might still favor Donald Trump, even as he's pursued by prosecutors the way Bonnie Prince Charlie once was pursued by redcoats. And the close-run aspects of the past stand as a perpetual reminder of just how many different futures might await us.