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# *William Gibson's Publications and their Context*

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Abstract

*This essay celebrates William Gibson's rich and diverse work as an important contribution to a better understanding of the British past, in several fields which have come under close scrutiny by Anglophone historians for the last thirty or forty years.*

William Gibson's work is of great significance not only because of his scholarship and range but also due to his successful determination to link key elements of discussion on eighteenth-century Britain and, more particularly, England. This was notably the case with his sophisticated politicisation of ecclesiastical history.

From the 1980s, there was a revival of interest in eighteenth-century Britain[1]. In particular, attention was paid to the "long eighteenth century", with the years 1660/88-1832 seen as constituting a coherent period for analysis. There was a renewal of interest in the period's politics and

[1] I benefited greatly from an invitation in 2024 from Perri Gauci to speak at the eighteenth-century Britain seminar in Oxford.

particularly the Crown's and aristocracy's political rôles. There was a sustained investigation of religion – the Established Church, Dissent, and Methodism, significant clergymen, and the continuing importance of ecclesiology, churchmanship and theology. Much was done to integrate the histories of England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, hitherto too often treated separately; much was produced on the provinces and towns; and the theme of multiple identities excited interest. Taken together, this work greatly enhanced and revised our understanding of the period.

Gibson's work reflected and contributed considerably to this revision. Underpinned by very wide reading of manuscript and printed contemporary sources, and displaying an extensive grasp of secondary works, his studies stretch from the late seventeenth century to the early Victorian period. In particular, he has carefully analysed the politics of the Revolution of 1688, while his work also has greatly contributed to a fresh appreciation of the importance and vitality of religion in eighteenth-century England, and particularly the strength of the Church of England, through, *inter alia*, broad surveys, his work on sermons, and his studies of Benjamin Hoadly and Samuel Wesley. He studied Wales (notably neglected when compared with the other component parts of Britain) and also explored the English localities, as in his work on Taunton and also the diocese of Winchester. His interest in identities was displayed in the volume which he edited with Robert Ingram on *Religious Identities in Britain 1660-1832* (2005). This contribution seeks to clarify the context for Gibson's work. It does not offer a summary of his publications which, instead, should be approached by a careful reading of them. However, a contextualisation is necessary.

Christianity, continuity and locality are three key themes in Gibson's work, and his standard means are a textual mastery of relevant works as well as the focus on relevant individuals. The context within which he operated very much moved in Gibson's direction as the previous secular reading of the period, associated in particular with J.H. Plumb, became less credible, both for the eighteenth century itself and for the "long eighteenth century", however defined. The last always included the «Glorious Revolution» of 1688-9, and Gibson has worked extensively on its background, not least in the discussion of the hostile episcopal response to James II's Declaration of Indulgence of 1687. He has handled with great skill the politics of ecclesiology, and notably the ecclesiastical politics, not

least the bitter and divisive aftermath of the «Glorious Revolution»[2].

Many members of the Church of England regarded the changes from 1689 as a threat not only to their position, but also to the religious orthodoxy, moral order and socio-political cohesion that the Church was seen as representing and sustaining. This perception that the Toleration Act was but part of a longer-lasting crisis contributed to a feeling of malaise and uncertainty. The individual quest for salvation depicted by Bunyan, side-tracked, and thus evaded, the intercessionary role of the Sacraments, the administering clergy, and the ceremonial context in formal sacral spaces. Thus, clerical ideology was challenged, although some clerics (and laity) refused to accept the new system and became Non-Jurors. The writings of radical Whigs, such as John Toland, sharpened a sense of Anglican anxiety, as did Dissenter practices and alleged ambition. Occasional Conformity, the loophole that allowed Dissenters to avoid restrictions on non-Anglicans, particularly troubled many commentators favourable to the Church of England[3]. Sir John Pakington, a Tory MP, in 1703 told the House of Commons that Occasional Conformity was «scandalous and knavish, that the Dissenters would soon control the Commons», and «then I'll venture to pronounce the days of the Church of England few». The practice was called «playing bo-peep with God Almighty».

Tory concerns looked toward the 1709 sermon by Dr. Henry Sacheverell, a Tory High Anglican cleric, who argued that the Church was in danger under the Revolution settlement, as interpreted by the Whigs. In turn, the Whigs, in power from 1714, took a different, more favourable, position toward Dissent, leading to bitter Tory criticism as well as widespread anti-Dissenting riots in 1715.

Thanks to toleration, the Church had to operate more effectively if it was to resist the challenge of other churches. Some bishops, such as Henry Compton and Gilbert Burnet, consciously responded to the idea of competition from Dissent, Burnet's *Discourse of the Pastoral Care* (1692) for clerics being written in this vein. The duty of the Church to teach the faith was much emphasised: religious activism for clergy and laity alike was stressed in Anglican propaganda. Indeed, the Church continued the themes established at the Reformation of strengthening piety and education, the two contributing to the central role of the Church in issues

[2] W. Gibson, *Enlightenment Prelate: Benjamin Hoadly, 1676-1761*, Clarke & co., Cambridge 2004.

[3] D. Defoe, *An Enquiry into the Occasional Conformity of Dissenters, in Cases of Preferment*, London 1697.

of identity and politics, but also leaving room for significant tension between clergy and laity[4]. The role of the Church involved continued effort, not least in providing a clergy and churches able to serve all.

Division and its resolution have been themes tackled by Gibson, not least in Taunton, where on 11 May, the anniversary of the raising of the siege of the Parliamentary-held stronghold in 1645 during the English Civil War, a result which was presented as a great providential salvation against the Royalists, was celebrated with sermons preached into the 1720s and an annual celebration into the 1770s[5]. Politically, these events were a Dissenter radical expression of opposition to the Tory Corporation (town government). These local politics relived, and were enlivened by, historical divisions[6]. So also for Salisbury, and the same happened in many other towns[7].

Nevertheless, aside from Whig bishops who preached moderation in dealing with Dissenters, so did Tories such as Compton. Protestant unity, indeed, remained a prominent theme in public polemic, not least against Jacobitism.

Reference to Jacobitism was an aspect of a more fixed anti-Catholicism. Catholicism was seen by many not as an alternative religion, but as a false one, indeed therefore an anti-religion. The demonstrative Catholic zeal of the Old Pretender, "James III"[8], enabled the ministerial press to exploit the anti-Catholic issue. Reports of Catholic atrocities in Europe were used to discredit the Jacobite cause. Indeed, despite Britain's alliance with France from 1716 to 1731, anti-Catholicism was a key ideological commitment of the ministerial press. Catholicism was presented as a pernicious system of trumpery, based on an inversion of reason, exploiting indolence, evil, superstition and folly, and dangerous to the liberty, property and life of the British. Developments in Europe, where Catholicism was closely linked, according to the British press, to autoc-

[4] D. Spaeth, *The Church in an Age of Danger. Parsons and Parishioners, 1660-1740* (Cambridge, 2000) is less optimistic than W. Gibson, *The Church of England 1688-1832. Unity and Accord*, Taylor & Francis, London 2001.

[5] W. Gibson, *Religion and the Enlightenment 1600-1800. Conflict and the Rise of Civic Humanism in Taunton*, Lang, Oxford-Berne-Berlin-Bruxelles-Frankfurt am Main-New York-Wien 2007, p. 62.

[6] Ivi, *passim*.

[7] W. Gibson, *English Provincial Engagement in Religious Debates. The Salisbury Quarrel of 1705-15*, «Huntington Library Quarterly», 80 (2017), pp. 21-45.

[8] «The Flying Post: or, Post Master», n. 4900, from Tuesday, June 23, to Thursday, June 25, 1724.

racy, and where measures against Protestantism could be readily grasped, were an abrupt and clear warning of what could happen in Britain. Persecuted Protestants, for example in France, the Vaudois and Bohemia, were regarded as heroes.

Moreover, British history allegedly illustrated the dangers from Catholicism. Thus, alongside the Gunpowder Plot (1605), the Great Fire of London (1666) and other events were blamed on the Catholics[9]. Foreign policy operated in part as a palimpsest, with changes of meaning linked to the impact of new perceptions of memory as the memories of the past were reinterpreted in terms of the exigencies of the present. At the same time as religion served as a key part of national identity[10], foreign policy was understood in terms of long-term confessional rivalries.

Divine Providence was seen at work in war with France, as in a sermon by Michael Stanhope preached in the royal chapel at Whitehall on 19 August 1708 and printed that year. This sermon offered thanksgiving «for the happy success [...] against the late insolent attempts of the Pretender ["James III"] to invade [...] Great Britain; as also for the glorious victory [by John, Duke of Marlborough] near Oudenaarde»[11].

The publication of sermons is an aspect of Gibson's broader treatment of the culture of print which, in the case of Benjamin Hoadly, on whom he has published extensively, included discussion of foreign policy and constitutional issues[12]. In his interest in the culture of print, Gibson is linking to wider currents of scholarship on the period. Gibson has emphasised the degree to which religious themes were central in the culture of print and throw light on the supposed modernisation represented by publication.

In the «London Journal», Hoadly was happy to draw on standard Whig themes in order to castigate the threat from Jacobitism and Catholicism as slavery[13]. At the same time, Hoadly wrote that an emotional response, notably from the populace, was unacceptable. He argued that true patri-

[9] «Flying Post: or, Post Master», n. 4004, from Saturday, August 31, to Tuesday, September 3, 1717.

[10] T. Claydon, I. McBride (eds.), *Protestantism and National Identity. Britain and Ireland c. 1650-c. 1850*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998.

[11] See, more generally, J.J. Caudle, *The Defence of Georgian Britain: the Anti-Jacobite Sermon, 1715-1746*, and W. Johnston, *Preaching, Salvation, Victories, and Thanksgivings*, in K.A. Francis, W. Gibson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689-1901*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012, pp. 245-260, 261-274.

[12] W. Gibson, *Enlightenment Prelate* cit., pp. 207-112.

[13] «The London Journal», n. 173, Saturday, November 17, 1722.

otism was incompatible with the love of popularity, referred to the latter as «what the passions and clamours of a multitude demand [...] sudden passionate wishes», and went on to discern Jacobitism and sedition behind much of the opposition[14], which was a convenient governmental approach.

As a Whig bishop, Hoadly's journalism overlapped with the ecclesiastical world. While open to a range of influences across the political span, that world had its own internal dynamics, institutional, historical, theological and political, as well as specific international links. Gibson has contributed to all of these themes. Because the Established Church offered an imperial exceptionalism that did not match the correspondence discussed in terms of an English *ancien régime*, the latter was not central to his work. However, in all other respects, Gibson's measured scholarship has made a crucial contribution.

[14] «The London Journal», n. 168, Saturday, October 13, 1722.