

## Introduction

In the age of Queen Anne, England struggled to define itself as it looked to the past events of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and forward to the prospect of the Hanoverian Succession. Differing views and interpretations began to surface in a party system that divided the people into Tories and Whigs, High Churchmen and Low Churchmen, Jacobites and non-Jacobites. The political debate was lively, energetic and dramatic. Quite remarkably, the issues came to the fore in the person of Henry Sacheverell, whose High Church stance thrust him into this controversy and led to a trial that became the stage for expositions on the various interpretations of England's past and its future. This study will examine the man, the issues, the sermon and the trial that encapsulate the drama of the first age of party.

### **The Man: A Biographical Sketch of Henry Sacheverell**

Henry Sacheverell was born on February 8, 1674, in St. Peter's parsonage at Marlborough in Wiltshire, to Joshua and Susannah Sacheverell. His father, a son of a Presbyterian minister and dissenter—a fact that would prove ironic and embarrassing to Henry Sacheverell—, studied at St. Catharine's Hall, Cambridge. Because of that education, Joshua Sacheverell became an Anglican cleric with a living as rector of St. Peter's parsonage. Joshua and Susannah had six sons and two daughters; Henry was the third son. Henry's brothers were undistinguished in their careers and it is likely that Henry could not have expected much more had it not been for the death of his father in January 1684. When Joshua passed away, Edward and Katherine Hearst, a staunch High Anglican family, adopted Henry. The Hearst family possessed considerable means and so, Henry became privy to a prominent education, first at Public Grammar School in Marlborough and then, at Magdalen College, Oxford.

At fifteen years of age, Henry began his undergraduate program. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree on June 30, 1693 and a Master's degree on May 16, 1695. As Holmes notes, "there are foreshadowings of the turbulent, passionate, arrogant, young don of the early 1700s" but "no hint of a spectacular academic career, either as an undergraduate or later in the Faculty of Divinity" (1973:8-9). The little evidence that remains suggests that Henry was a hot-tempered

young man, inclined to the typical rebelliousness of adolescence and college living. In fact, a contemporary of Henry observed, "that his behaviour was exceedingly light and foolish, without any gravity and seriousness which became one in holy orders; that he was fitter to make a player than a clergyman" (Holmes 1973:10). Nevertheless, Henry was ordained on September 19, 1697 at Eccleshall Church.

From the dean and chapter of Lichfield, Henry received his first living at Cannock of Staffordshire. Henry remained in this position from September 1697 until July 1701. Henry did not enjoy his post in Cannock, as he particularly disdained ministrations (Holmes 1973:10). It is in Cannock, however, that Henry began to earn a reputation as a fiery preacher in defense of High Church and Tory politics. His preaching generated sufficient attention and praise that in July 1701 his alma mater, Magdalen College, elected Henry to a vacant fellowship. Every indication suggests that Henry soon earned a reputation as an unsavory, boorish and abusive character, of which a proclivity for hard drinking was undoubtedly a contributing factor (Holmes 1973:13-14). Yet, at the same time, Henry also seems to have taken his faith quite seriously. In one of Henry's few surviving manuscripts, he writes before God:

Purge my mind of every evil thought and sinful desire, suppress and stifle the very first motions of an unjust concupiscence or affection, curb the violence of my passions, and subdue every inclination to thy Holy Will & Command. Give me such a diligent watchfulness over my heart and tongue (Holmes 1973:15).

His personal life notwithstanding, the appointment to Magdalen College gave Henry the opportunity to improve his academic credentials and exploit the College pulpit to earn repute as an influential preacher. In 1703, he was College Librarian and was elected to an endowed lectureship. In 1708, at only thirty-four years of age, he received a Doctorate of Divinity and an appointment to Senior Dean of Arts. In 1709, he resigned his position as College Librarian to assume the position of Bursar. Throughout these years, Dr. Sacheverell preached many fierce, politically charged sermons. In 1702, he preached the sermon *The Political Union* at Oxford, which railed against dissenters, occasional conformists and Whiggism. By way of this sermon and

others like it, Dr. Sacheverell became known as the “bloody flag officer” and a defender of the Church Militant, phrases taken from his sermons (Holmes 1973:17). With his popularity increasing, he was called to the position of chaplain at St. Saviour’s in London. From 1705 until 1709, Dr. Sacheverell served this church—one of the largest in the city. This position only increased Dr. Sacheverell’s growing celebrity. His preaching was soon in demand in nearby assizes (Scudi 1939:28). It would be this demand that would see Henry Sacheverell thrust into the ideological wars that were raging throughout England.

### **The Issues: “Church in Danger”**

Henry Sacheverell rose to prominence in the reign of Queen Anne, in what is often referred to as the first age of party. England was still reeling from the tumultuous events of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The people and its leaders, civil and clerical, were still coming to grips with the significance of the Civil War of 1642 and the Glorious Revolution of 1688. In addition, various levels of English society were feeling the force of enlightenment ideals. In the period of 1697 to 1710, the Tory or High Church party articulated a position that they promoted under the campaign slogan “Church in Danger” in the elections of 1697-1701, 1705-1706 and 1709-1710 (Holmes 1973:47). The ideological controversies raised by the Civil War, the Revolution and the Enlightenment served as the primary issues of the “Church in Danger” campaign. These issues included the rights and authority of the monarchy, religious toleration and occasional conformity.

### ***The Rights and Authority of the Monarchy***

The Civil War and the Revolution brought to the forefront of English politics and religion the issue of the divine right of the monarchy. As England quickly realized, the Civil War and the Revolution established precedent for the overthrow of the monarchy. On January 30, 1649, the Parliament of England beheaded their king, Charles I. In the Revolution Settlement, Parliament, under a dubious pretence, invited William III, a foreign prince, to come to England and when he did, and their own king fled, Parliament appointed him and his wife, Mary, as joint sovereigns of England. For many in the Church of England, both the Civil War and the Revolution constituted a violation of the divine right of the monarchy. The High Church Anglicans advocated a doctrine of

passive obedience, which regarded any resistance to the Supreme Power of the Crown on any pretence as unlawful and sinful. Fortunately, the Restoration rectified the sins of the Civil War but as for the Revolution, the matter was far from resolved. The High Church Party was itself divided on the legitimacy of the actions of the state in the Revolution. The central issue of their disagreement was whether the Revolution involved resistance against James II. For the Jacobites, the Revolution did involve resistance against the Crown and as such, the entire post-Revolution state was illegitimate; it would be necessary to restore the Crown to James II or his son. For non-Jacobites of the High Church Party, it was necessary to deny that any resistance had been involved. As such, William III was justified in assuming the Crown by the consent of Parliament. The Whigs did not struggle with the same ideological balancing act required by the High Church Party. For the Whigs, the Revolution was justified with social contract theory; that is, when a sovereign contravenes the law and the constitution of the state, he breaks a social contract with his subjects and relinquishes the right to be their sovereign. In this event, the instruments of the state, such as Parliament, can resist and replace the sovereign. In the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was important for England to find an authoritative resolution to this ideological debate because it challenged the very legitimacy of the government, the National Church and the self-identity of the nation.

### ***Religious Toleration***

Another issue of the "Church in Danger" campaign was freedom of religion, specifically the rights of dissenters in relation to the National Church. The Toleration Act of 1689, emerging out of the Revolution Settlement of 1688, provided protection to dissenters in England. It granted freedom of worship and permitted dissenters to have their own preachers and teachers. In part, the Toleration Act was a reward for the supporting role the dissenters had played for the Whigs during the Revolution. For the High Church Party, however, it compromised the religious integrity of the nation, challenged the supremacy and rights of the Church of England and endangered the very foundations of government. Indeed, the High Church Party branded the dissenters as guilty of the execution of Charles I. They also argued that the role of the dissenters in the Revolution

once again demonstrated a willingness of dissenters to support any attempts at subversion and rebellion. The High Church Party wanted to repeal the Toleration Act.

### ***Occasional Conformity***

In 1661 and 1673, the English Parliament enacted the Test and Corporation Acts respectively. These Acts were meant to ensure the supremacy of the Church of England by, among other things, restricting civil, military and academic offices to conforming members of the National Church. The standard of conformity was participation in the Anglican sacrament of communion. For many dissenters, this standard of conformity was not problematic (Flaningam 1978:39-40). Nevertheless, while occasional conformity remained only a theological issue, mainly dissenters spoke out against the practice. They regarded it as inconsistent with their claims to religious purity. It was not until the High Church Party recognized its political implications that they perceived occasional conformity to be a threat:

As long as occasional conformity remained a purely religious or theological question, Anglicans tended to regard it as little more than another example of Dissenting querulousness. However, when the practice acquired explicit political significance—Dissenters seeking or holding office—, then it became a matter of considerable importance to the long-remembered Cavaliers and their sons. For to the High Churchmen, occasional conformity for political gain was a perversion of religion, a hypocritical misuse of the Sacrament as a legal loophole in the pursuit of undeserved benefits (Flaningam 1978:41).

The High Church Party was also undoubtedly motivated in their opposition to occasional conformity by the fact that as dissenters employed this legal loophole and gained office, they supported the Whig Party. For the High Church Party, the alliance between dissenters and Whigs demonstrated “the seditious, antimonarchical character” of these groups (Flaningam 1978:42).

### **The Sermon: The Content of Sacheverell’s Sermon of 1709**

When Henry Sacheverell preached, he made quite clear his stance on the issues of the rights and authority of the monarchy, religious toleration and occasional conformity. As Scudi

writes, “[Sacheverell] believed that the English government and the English Church were both expressions of the one and only English state” (1939:24). Any dissent that draws away the power and authority of these institutions and its sincere and genuine practice will endanger the future of the nation. As such, Dr. Sacheverell grouped together with the dissenters, the Whigs, the enlightenment philosophers and writers and even, the Roman Catholics. His preaching against them was unrelenting in its ferocity and he demanded that his peers and parishioners demonstrate the same zeal for the Church of England (Scudi 1939:33). Therefore, when the Lord Mayor of London invited Dr. Sacheverell to preach a sermon commemorating the exposure of the Gunpowder Plot and perhaps more significantly to Dr. Sacheverell, the landing of William III at Torbay, it is not surprising that Dr. Sacheverell would preach a sermon denouncing the dissenters and defending the Church.

On November 5, 1709, Dr. Sacheverell ascended to “the most famous pulpit in the very heart of the citadel of Whiggery,” St. Paul’s Cathedral, to preach a sermon entitled *The Perils of False Brethren both in Church and State* (Holmes 1973:61). Holmes describes the moment vividly:

During the prayers and hymns which preceded the sermon Doctor Sacheverell sat with his fellow-clergy. He offered the Thanksgiving prayer himself, significantly with ‘not a word of the two great mercies of the day’. But otherwise he remained half-oblivious of the service, locked away in a private world, working himself up into the mood of frenzied anger and near-hysteria which an Oxford audience would at once have recognized as presaging a storm. His immediate neighbour, never having seen him before and ‘little suspecting him to be the Bloody Flag Officer’, was utterly astonished ‘at the fiery red that overspread his face . . . and the goggling wildness of his eyes’, and even more taken aback when, on his cue, ‘he came into the pulpit like a Sybil to the mouth of her cave’—the very picture of concentrated ferocity. There, from his canopied height,

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for fully an hour and a half he thundered away with every battery against the whole range of his favourite targets (1973:63).

Based in part on his Oxford sermon of 1702, *The Political Union, False Brethren* derived its title and explosive theme from 2 Corinthians 11. It systematically raised each of the major issues of the "Church in Danger" campaign. Dr. Sacheverell railed against the false brethren in the Church for their pernicious support of toleration, occasional conformity and their failure to subject themselves to "absolute and unconditional Obedience to the Supreme Power" (Holmes 1973:65).

On the first two issues, Dr. Sacheverell began by lamenting the peril of the Church at the hands of "Hypocrites, Deists, Socinians and Atheists . . . [and] not only by our profess'd Enemies, but which is worse, by our Pretended Friends and False Brethren" (Scudi 1939:32). Dr. Sacheverell vehemently denounced toleration as the means by which enemies were able to enter the Church and the government. He declared that "the English Government can never be Secure on any other Principles, but strictly those of the Church of England" and furthermore, "that tho' They [the Dissenters] do submit to the Government, their Obedience is forced and constrain'd and therefore so Treacherous and Uncertain, as never to be Trusted" (Scudi 1939:33). This great threat to the Church of England was most apparent among those brethren that supported occasional conformity. By this scheme, Dr. Sacheverell envisioned that the false brethren intended to "take in Jews, Quakers, Mahometans and anything, as well as Christians" (Holmes 1973:67). He also held that through the measures of toleration and occasional conformity the false brethren "weaken, undermine and betray in themselves, and encourage and put it in the power of our professed enemies to overturn and destroy, the constitution and establishment of [Church and State]" (Holmes 1973:67). Dr. Sacheverell's attack was scathing and remorseless. It blurred the lines of distinction between all groups outside the High Church Party; to him, they all shared "the Hellish principles of fanaticism, regicide and anarchy" (Holmes 1973:66).

If these statements had been the extent of Dr. Sacheverell's politically charged message, the sermon may not have generated the response it eventually did. But, Dr. Sacheverell also

attacked the dissenters and the Whigs on their defense of the Revolution. Dr. Sacheverell criticized the false brethren as constitutional innovators:

. . . no Innovation whatsoever should be allow'd in the Fundamental Constitution of any State, without a very pressing, nay, unavoidable Necessity of It . . . this Fundamental Doctrine, notwithstanding its Divine Sanction . . . is now, it seems, quite Exploded, and Ridicul'd out of Countenance, as an Unfashionable, Superannuated, nay (which is more wonderful) as a Dangerous Tenet, utterly Inconsistent with the Right, Liberty and Property of the People (Scudi 1939:35).

His attack continued on the Whigs. He accused them of making the sovereign "a creature of their own power" (Kenyon 1977:130). Because of the Whig belief in a social contract theory, these false brethren believed that their resistance to James II was justifiable. In order to defend the High Church Party position, Sacheverell clarified that no resistance had taken place. He pointed out that William III "solemnly disclaimed the least imputation of resistance in his declaration" and Parliament declared, "that they set the crown upon his head upon no other title but the vacancy of the throne" (Kenyon 1977:129). By insisting that resistance had taken place and that it was justified, Dr. Sacheverell reasoned that dissenters and Whigs "cast such black and odious colours upon both" the Revolution and William III (Kenyon 1977:129). He then appealed to Scripture and asked, "In what moving and Lively Colours does the Holy Psalmist paint out the crafty Insidiousness of such wilely Volpones?" (Scudi 1939:35). The reference to the "volpones" was a not so subtle attack on Lord Godolphin and the Junto Whigs of Queen Anne's cabinet and it identified the false brethren of his sermon with the Queen's ministers.

As was the custom, the sermon was published about a week after the service at St. Paul's Cathedral. While the Lord Mayor and the Whig politicians of London immediately denounced the sermon, it did not come to the attention of Parliament until the November 15, 1709. In all, publishers printed eleven English editions of the sermon. It also circulated in French, German and Dutch. With all these prints and reprints as well as pirated editions, there may have

been as many 100,000 copies, read by more than 250,000 people (Rupp 1986:67). The sermon could not go unchallenged.

### **The Trial: Sacheverell's Impeachment**

The governing Whigs had at least three possible responses that they could direct at Henry Sacheverell and his sermon: (1) the Whig propagandists and clergymen could write and preach against him, (2) the Whigs could charge Henry Sacheverell at the Queen's Bench with libel and inciting sedition, or (3) the Whigs could attempt to impeach Henry Sacheverell. The first of these responses began almost immediately after the publication of Dr. Sacheverell's sermon. The pamphlets published against *False Brethren* included *The Peril of Being Zealously Affected, but not Well* (Ridpath), *The Best Way of Answering Dr. Sacheverell* (Defoe), *The Cherubim with a Flaming Sword* (Defoe) and *True Answer* (Kennett). For many Whigs, Dr. Sacheverell's sermon was not even worthy of an official response. Nevertheless, Lord Godolphin and the Junto Whigs recognized that Dr. Sacheverell's popularity was only increasing. Dr. Sacheverell had challenged the Whigs in their own citadel and as Holmes notes, "there were early and disturbing signs that Sacheverell might develop into a dangerous demagogue" (1973:79). Dr. Sacheverell's sermon was sufficiently ambiguous in its veiled insinuations that a Queen's Bench trial would probably fail. As such, the Whigs opted to impeach Dr. Sacheverell through a hearing at the Bar of the House of Lords. After a Christmas break and many meetings, Henry Sacheverell was finally taken into custody of the House of Lords on January 12, 1710.

The trial against Henry Sacheverell might have proceeded quickly if it were not for several delays orchestrated by Dr. Sacheverell, his lawyers and the High Church Party, which came to a head in the Commons on February 4, 1710. With some unexpected political maneuverings, the Tories were able to secure the attendance of the entire Commons at Dr. Sacheverell's trial. Because of this motion and others that followed it, the trial of Dr. Sacheverell became a public trial. By the time the trial began on February 27, 1710, Sir Christopher Wren had renovated Westminster Hall to accommodate an audience of more than two thousand people. The case of Dr. Sacheverell would pit the Tories against the Whigs, High Churchmen against Low

Churchmen, in an ideological battle on the significance and legacy of the Civil War and the Revolution for the future of England. In effect, the identity of the nation was put on trial before the people of London.

The Prosecution, led by such distinguished persons as Thomas Parker, James Montagnu, Nicholas Lechmere, James Stanhope and Robert Walpole, argued that on four points Dr. Sacheverell was guilty of high crimes and misdemeanors against Parliament and the Crown. In the first point, the Prosecution argued that Dr. Sacheverell maintained in his sermon "that the necessary means used to bring about the said happy Revolution were odious and unjustifiable" (Holmes 1973:280). In the second point, it was argued that Dr. Sacheverell claimed "Toleration, granted by law, is unreasonable, and the allowance of it unwarrantable" (Holmes 1973:280). In the third point, the Prosecution alleged that Dr. Sacheverell

doth falsely and seditiously suggest and assert that the Church of England is in a condition of great peril and adversity under her Majesty's administration; and in order to arraign and blacken the said vote or resolution of both Houses of Parliament . . . he in opposition thereto doth suggest the Church to be in danger (Holmes 1973:281).

In the fourth and final point of the impeachment, the Prosecution asserted that through the perversion of Scripture, Dr. Sacheverell "doth falsely and maliciously suggest that her Majesty's administration, both in ecclesiastical and civil affairs, tends to the destruction of the constitution" (Holmes 1973:281).

When the Defense finally rose on March 3, 1710, they had to contend with these four points of the indictment. Led and supported by Simon Harcourt, Samuel Dodd, Constantine Phipps, Humphrey Henchman and Francis Atterbury, the Defense countered that Dr. Sacheverell was a "grievously misused man, whose words had been twisted out of all recognition, but 'a subject of England is not to be made criminal by a laboured construction of doubtful words'" (Bennett 1975:115). The Defense maintained that Dr. Sacheverell defended the Revolution:

He has indeed affirmed the utter illegality of Resistance on any pretence whatsoever to the Supreme Power; but it can't be pretended there was any such Resistance used at the Revolution. The Supreme Power in this kingdom is the Legislative Power, and the Revolution took effect by the Lords and Commons concurring and assisting in it. Whatever, therefore, the Doctor has asserted of the utter illegality of Resistance, his assertion being applied to the Supreme Power can't relate to any Resistance used at the Revolution, and consequently can't be an affirmance that such 'necessary means' were odious and unjustifiable (Holmes 1973:182-3).

On the second point, the Defense contended,

tho' it be provided in the Act of Exemption [of 1689] that persons taking the oaths and making the declaration in that Act shall not be prosecuted . . . it is not by that Act expressed or intended that Non-conformity to the Established Church should no longer be looked upon as schism, or that separatists may not, by the pastors of the Church, be pronounced schismatical (Holmes 1973:195).

With this in mind, the Defense further justified Dr. Sacheverell's warnings concerning the Church in danger to be simply the duty of a good pastor protecting his flock. In order to identify this danger, the Defense brought forward and read a series of sermons and pamphlets that blasphemed the Church, the State and the Crown. Holmes relates the reaction of one observer to these readings who states that these books were "full of base reflections upon the Queen and her family, one passage that she had no more title to the crown than my Lord Mayor's horse" (Holmes 1973:195). This person went on to conclude that "None of common understanding but must think the Church, and State too, in danger from such christened heathens if suffered to go on without notice taken of them" (Holmes 1973:195). On the final point, the Defense remained largely quiet and ineffective. They could only claim that Dr. Sacheverell supported the Queen. They denied the connection between the false brethren and the "volpones" as an artificial

reconstruction of the Prosecution. In fact, more than seven pages separated these references, they argued.

The trial ended with Dr. Sacheverell rising to address the assembly. In a personal and highly emotional speech, so uncharacteristic of Dr. Sacheverell that some thought Sir Francis Atterbury was its author, Dr. Sacheverell claimed his innocence and pledged his loyalty to the Queen and her government (Bennett 1975:116). Dr. Sacheverell also decried his impeachment:

. . . the avowed design of my impeachment is, by the means of it, to procure an Eternal and Indelible Brand of Infamy to be fixed in a parliamentary way on all those who maintain the doctrine of Non-Resistance, and to have the clergy directed what doctrines they are to preach, and what not (Bennett 1975:116).

He then continued, “no favourable allowances have been made to a minister of the gospel, discharging the duty of his function, and rebutting vice and irreligion with an honest and well-meant zeal” (Bennett 1975:116). Finally, he implored the sympathy of the audience by appealing to his responsibilities and duties to his parishioners. His eloquence was such that many in the audience were openly sobbing or at least, holding back tears. It was his finest hour in the pulpit.

### **Conclusion**

In the House of Lords, the Whigs maintained a slight majority, voting Dr. Sacheverell guilty of high crimes and misdemeanors by a count of only seventeen. The majority, however, did not intend to level a harsh sentence. Even the Queen was of the opinion that Dr. Sacheverell should be treated lightly. The House fixed a penalty of suspension from the pulpit for three years and the burning of his sermons. In the court of public opinion, the Whigs fared far worse. During the trial, on March 1, mobs in London rioted against Whigs and dissenters for their part in the Prosecution. After the verdict and sentence were read, many High Churchmen regarded it as a victory—celebrations were held throughout England. Dr. Sacheverell became a hero and his party rode the crest of his popularity to resounding victory in the 1710 elections. In the cabinet, Godolphin and most of the Junto Whigs soon found themselves replaced by Robert Harley and other prominent Tories. In 1713, after the suspension expired, Queen Anne appointed Dr.

Sacheverell to one of the richest livings in all of England, St. Andrew's. The Sacheverell affair was a resounding victory for the Doctor and his party.

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