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THE SACHEVERELL AFFAIR:
ITS CAUSES AND IMPLICATIONS

by

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The Sacheverell Affair of 1709-10 is a much overlooked event in English history. It was not significant in itself, being a rather trivial incident, but was significant for its far-reaching implications, in terms of its impact on both the political situation in Britain and diplomacy on the Continent.

Preparation of this paper was hindered somewhat by the fact that many primary sources are unavailable in this country. Among the primary sources which were obtainable and which proved useful were Howell's State Trials and Bishop Burnet's History of His Own Time; the Duchess of Marlborough's memoirs and Thomas Hearne's diary contained some pungent observations about contemporary personages but were of a gossipy nature.

Secondary sources which were particularly valuable include the sixth volume of Winston Churchill's massive biography of Marlborough, G. M. Trevelyan's and David Green's studies of Queen Anne's reign, and Keith Feiling's examination of the early years of the Tory Party. A. T. Scudi's monograph, The Sacheverell Affair, was also relied upon in researching this topic.
I

INTRODUCTION

In 1709, Queen Anne was in the eighth year of her reign, a reign dominated by the diplomatic and military commitment against the France of Louis XIV. This commitment began under William III and, after his death, was continued under the direction of John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough.

Ann was personally dominated by a formidable triumvirate: Marlborough, as Captain-General of the armed forces, had control over the war effort; Sidney Earl of Godolphin, who held the office of Lord Treasurer, raised money for the war and managed political affairs at home; and Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough, who, through the extraordinary personal ascendancy she had exercised over Anne since girlhood, had the responsibility of influencing the Queen so that she was favorably disposed towards the Marlborough-Godolphin policies.

Standing behind this trio was the bulk of the Whig Party, though the parties at this time were not the tightly disciplined, well-organized political structures that parties are today. William III had been forced to rely on the Whigs since they alone had supported his foreign policy, and, in the reign of Anne, the Whigs had continued to be the Government Party. Controlling the Whigs in Parliament was a group of five aristocrats known as the "Junto": Baron John Somers, the Earl of Sunderland, the Earl of Orford, the Marquis of Wharton, and the Earl of Halifax, all of whom were in the Government.
Anne, however, was increasingly restive about this situation in which she felt herself a captive. Her personal estrangement from the Duchess of Marlborough began as early as 1706, when the Duchess had pressured Anne into appointing her—i.e., Sarah's son-in-law, Charles Spencer, Earl of Sunderland, as a Secretary of State. Anne violently loathed Sunderland for his outspoken Whiggish views, and she never forgave Sarah for this incident: "The Queen was utterly worn out by her arguments and admonitions. She desired above all things never again to hear her voice or see her handwriting."

The issue of appointments to the vacant bishoprics in the Church of England in 1707 caused additional friction between the monarch and her Government. Anne favored High Church appointments (i.e., those Anglican ministers who stressed strict observance of ritual and ceremony), but High Church ministers tended to be biased towards the Tories, and, in fact, many had attacked the Godolphin ministry during the 1705 election campaign with the cry that the "Church was in danger". Hence, the Whigs favored Low Church appointments (i.e., Anglican ministers who de-emphasized pomp and ritual, and were more tolerant of diverse opinions), and, by means of heavy pressure from Godolphin, Anne was forced to abandon some of her High Church appointees.

Anne, by 1708, thoroughly hated the domination of her Government by the Churchills, Godolphin, and the Whig Junto. She came to rely increasingly—and unofficially—on the advice of Robert Harley, the Tory leader, and Mrs. Abigail Hill Masham, her lady-in-waiting who had replaced Sarah Churchill in her affections.
Compounding the Queen's dissatisfaction with the Whig Government was the growing unpopularity of the endless war on the Continent. Year after year, the war over the succession to the Spanish throne dragged on; despite the series of great military triumphs won by Marlborough—Blenheim (1704), Ramilles (1706), Oudenarde (1708)—this war against France still had not been brought to a victorious conclusion.

In Britain, the "strain of war was telling on the country. Land tax and malt tax hit the farmers, a swarm of duties on the necessities . . . came home to every household." Even with this heavy taxation, the Government was deeply in debt and, in 1709, spent the astronomical sum of £13 million on the war.

On the taxation issue, the propertied classes had a major grievance with the Whig Government. In addition to the unpopular taxes which the war had spawned, there was the practice of impressment to fill the ranks of the armed forces; the concept of press-gang recruiting struck a note of revulsion in a country where anti-military sentiment had been strong ever since the Civil War. Indeed, in January, 1709, the House of Commons, Tories and Whigs voting together, had defeated a Government bill to increase the governmental recruiting powers, because such an unpopular measure might cost the M.P.s their seats.

At this same time, the London populace was stirred up over the Government's decision to admit war refugees from the Palatinate into Britain. These German refugees were nearly all Lutheran (thus, Non-Conformist) and became "a charge on English charity and competition for English employment in a bad year."
In September of 1709, Marlborough fought a major battle against the French at Malplaquet. Once again, the French retreated, but, once again, there was no successful follow-up to the battle, and the heavy casualties which the "allies" sustained made Marlborough's victory seem Pyrrhic.

Aware of the Queen's hostility to Godolphin's ministry, the rift between his wife and Anne, and the war-weary mood of the country, Marlborough wanted reassurance that the struggle against Louis XIV would not be abandoned. Driven by his anxieties, Marlborough committed a blunder of monumental proportions: in October, he requested that he be appointed Captain-General for life.13

It must be remembered that the detested military rule of Cromwell and the Major-Generals had been only a half-century before, and, hence, Marlborough's desire for military carte blanche raised a furor which played directly into the hands of his Tory opponents. Gleeful Tories raised the specter of military dictatorship led by "King John II".14 With such adverse public reaction to Marlborough's request, Anne found it easy to deny him the lifetime appointment.15 "The Blenheim laurels had been tarnished by Malplaquet,"16 and with Marlborough's loss of prestige, the Whig Government which supported him could not help losing a large measure of popular appeal.

It is against this backdrop—the Queen's hostility to the Churchills and the Whig ministry, internal divisions within the ministry itself,
Marlborough and his conduct of the war under virulent attack, war-weariness and hatred of high taxes—that the seemingly minor incident concerning an obscure Anglican minister must be considered. Only then can the Sacheverell Affair be seen in a proper perspective.
II

SACHEVERELL AND THE SERMON

Dr. Henry Sacheverell (1674-1724) was an Anglican minister who had been educated at Oxford, where Joseph Addison, one of the leading literary figures of the Augustan Age, had been his roommate. Despite having attended this renowned citadel of higher education, Sacheverell never developed a taste for intellectual pursuits: even people in agreement with his theological views stated that he was "a man of little or no Learning."

From the beginning of his ecclesiastical career, Sacheverell took an extreme High Church position in religious matters. In 1701, he had published a religious tract entitled The Character of a Low Church Man, in which he attacked the practice of occasional conformity. A Sacheverell sermon in 1703 had called for the suppression of the Dissenters' academies, which he said would "Propagate a Generation of Vipers."

Sacheverell, in 1709, was chaplain at St. Saviour's, Southwark, in London, a post which he had held since 1705. In August, 1709, Sacheverell delivered a sermon, "The Communication of Sin", at the Assizes of Derby, which was virtually identical to the more celebrated sermon of three months later.

It seems clear that Sacheverell was a first-rate orator (or demagogue, depending on the point of view) and was striking in appearance:
He had a haughty, insolent air, which his friends found occasion often to complain of; but it made his presence more graceful in public . . . His person was framed well for his purposes, and he dressed well. A good assurance, clean gloves, white handkerchief well managed, with other suitable accomplishments, moved the hearts of many . . . .

The fifth of November was a day of double celebration in England: Guy Fawkes Day and the date of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 when William of Orange landed to oust the Catholic monarch, James II, from the throne. On that day in 1709, Henry Sacheverell gave a sermon at St. Paul's Cathedral before the Lord Mayor and aldermen of London. The text of his sermon was "In Perils Among False Brethren", in which he raised the old High Church cry of the "Church in danger."

Sacheverell accused the Government of attempting to "overbear and silence our Church . . . in order to break in upon the prerogative of the Crown," and said that the Constitution "is so vigorously attacked from without, and so lazily defended from within." He further stated that the Church of England had been "betrayed, and perfidiously given up by her own false-hearted and insidious Apostles," and that "her altars and sacraments prostituted to Hypocrites, Deists, Socinians, and Atheists . . . not only by our profess'd Enemies, but . . . by our Pretended Friends and False Brethren."

In upholding the High Church doctrine of non-resistance to constituted authority, Sacheverell asserted that the 1688 Revolution was acceptable because it did not represent resistance: James II had abdicated of his own free will, and William of Orange came to England
with no idea of conquest; had it been otherwise, the Revolution of 1688 would have been infamous. With such a tortuous, hair-splitting argument, Sacheverell, as Winston Churchill observed, "tried to indict the Revolution without apparently repudiating it."

Sacheverell renewed his attack on Dissenters, denouncing them as hypocrites and atheists and as "Vipers in Our Bosom." He concluded his sermon by claiming that the Anglican Church had been "undermined" by a Government filled with "professed enemies" of the Church, and he warned against the "Crafty Insidiousness of such Wily Volpones." The term, "Volpone", referring to a shrewd, unscrupulous man, came from the Ben Jonson play, The Fox, and was the nickname given to Godolphin by his opponents, due to his uncanny ability to stay in office.

Although this sermon was later notorious, it did not seem to cause a great uproar among the dignitaries present. In fact, the Lord Mayor dined with Sacheverell after the Sermon had been delivered, evidently pleased by the minister's remarks. There were, however, some eyewitnesses to the sermon who were disturbed by it:

It lasted a full hour and a half, and was delivered with all the assurance and confidence that violent preacher is so remarkable for. I could not have imagined if I had not actually heard it myself, that so much heat, Passion, Violence, and scurrilous Language, to say no worse of it, could have come from a Protestant pulpit. Such an incident should hardly have received any attention or be remembered by later generations, but this sermon of November 5th was published, and was thus brought to the attention of the general public.
Early eighteenth century England was noted for political pamphleteering, an activity in which men such as Defoe and Swift often engaged. It therefore seemed probable that the pamphlets containing Sacheverell's remarks would be lost in the flood of pro-Government and anti-Government tracts which inundated Londoners daily.

However, copies of the sermon reached the hands of influential people, and many were incensed at Sacheverell's vitriolic statements. Godolphin, who was still bitter over the High Church ministers' attacks on him in 1705, was stung by Sacheverell's reference to "wily Volpones". The decision to punish Sacheverell was pushed by Godolphin and Lord Wharton in order to chastise the High Church clergymen and discredit the Tories who supported them.

On December 13, 1709, a Whig M. P. named John Dolben denounced Sacheverell in the House of Commons for the sermons which he gave at Derby in August and at St. Paul's on November 5th. Sacheverell was ordered by the Commons to "attend at the bar of the House" on the next day.

The following day, December 14th, Sacheverell and the printer of the sermons appeared at the bar of the House. The printer was dismissed, and the Lord Mayor, a member of the Commons, disowned the sermons, denying that he had ordered their publication. The House accepted the Mayor's testimony believing it "more decent to give credit to their own member, though indeed few believed him."
Despite strenuous opposition from the Tories, led by Harley and William Bromley,\textsuperscript{44} it was resolved by the Commons that Sacheverell was guilty of "seditious libel", and that he should be impeached for "High Crimes and Misdemeanours"; a committee was appointed to draw up articles of impeachment.\textsuperscript{45} Sacheverell was then placed in the custody of the sergeant-at-arms\textsuperscript{46} and, soon afterwards, was impeached in the Lords.\textsuperscript{47}

The Commons drew up four articles of impeachment against Sacheverell:

1) he had cast aspersions upon the 1688 Revolution and the doctrine of resistance;

2) he attacked the doctrine of toleration;

3) he preached that the Church of England was in danger, contrary to a 1705 proclamation of Parliament which stated that the Church was in a "safe and flourishing condition";

4) he maligned the Queen's Government as "false brethren" who would betray the Church and the Constitution.\textsuperscript{48}

Sacheverell defended himself "in a very haughty and assuming style",\textsuperscript{49} but the Government pressed its case, deciding to try him in Westminster Hall, which Christopher Wren was directed to renovate for the occasion.\textsuperscript{50}

This was a grievous mistake on the ministry's part. The wisest course for the Government would have been simply to have ignored Sacheverell, treating his remarks as too insignificant to merit consideration. If it was felt that Sacheverell must be prosecuted for his inflammatory statements, he could have been tried in a regular
court for a misdemeanor, or, even going further, he could have been tried at the bar of the House of Lords, which would have been a logical procedure and out of the public eye.

Instead, the Government chose to try Sacheverell in a manner that was guaranteed to bring the maximum amount of public attention. By giving the impeachment all the trappings of a state trial, by trying him in Westminster Hall, the scene of many state trials in the past, the Whigs aided the Tory propagandists in placing a martyr's mantle upon Sacheverell and making him seem, in the parlance of the twentieth century, a "political prisoner".

The trial was not scheduled to begin until late February, 1710, and the time between the impeachment and the trial allowed supporters of Sacheverell to whip up public emotion. On the issue of the "Church in danger", the "strongest elements in the Tory Party and the immense power of the country clergy could be rallied." The Anglican clergy incited the people by saying that the Sacheverell impeachment was not only an attack on the Church but an attack on freedom of speech. Many High Churchmen felt that the authority and prestige of the Anglican Church were declining under—what they regarded as—the latitudinarian policies of the Whigs. The Duchess of Marlborough, a not unbiased observer, wrote that "eminent clergymen, who despised the man in their hearts, were engaged to stand publicly by him in the face of the world, as if the poor Church of England was now tried in him." The Tories and the
High Church spokesmen were able to put "the air of a saint upon a lewd, drunken, pampered man," as the Duchess acidly noted.56

An intriguing element in this affair is the support which Sacheverell received from the populace, the "mob." One scholar of this period of English history has emphasized the link between the Whigs and the Dissenters, who wanted to reform manners by abolishing drunkenness and swearing, punishing Sabbath-breaking, etc., even to the extent of using informers to expose "sinners." Nothing arouses more hostility than attempting to reform the foibles of human nature—witness Prohibition in the United States—and Sacheverell's "pose as defender of popular rights" against the reformers and "canting Whigs" certainly increased his stature in the eyes of many people.57

Undoubtedly, there were Whigs who felt that the time had come to settle accounts with the High Church clergymen,58 but others thought differently. Lord Somers was, perhaps, the most respected member of the Junto: a defense counsel in the historic Seven Bishops' case of 1688, chairman of the committee which framed the Bill of Rights (1689), and a leading figure in negotiating the Act of Union between England and Scotland in 1707. Somers, now holding the post of Lord President of the Council, remarked that the Sacheverell Affair would probably "end in the ruin of the Whig Party."59

On the 27th of February, 1710, the trial of Sacheverell began. As the minister made his way through the streets of London to Westminster Hall, he was surrounded and followed by large crowds who tried to kiss his hand, shouting "the Church and Sacheverell!"60 The London
mob was "altogether for the Doctor, and they expressed themselves with the utmost fury."61

The entire country seemed to come to a standstill as the trial began, and people talked of little else. Sacheverell was prayed for in a number of churches,62 and toasts were raised to him in taverns and pubs.63 People who failed to cheer him or pull off their hats as he passed to and from Westminster Hall were beaten by his more zealous supporters.64

Pro-Sacheverell sentiment took a nastier turn on February 28th, as crowds of his adherents burned down Dissenters' chapels in London.65 Fires were started in Drury Lane and Lincoln's Inn Fields,66 and Sunderland was forced to call out the Queen's Foot and Horse Guards as rampaging rioters threatened the homes of Whig notables and the Bank of England, which was then popularly regarded as a Whig institution.67

During the trial itself, the Whig prosecutors put forth arguments which demolished any remaining vestige of the "divine right" theory of monarchy. In their efforts to convict the Tory Sacheverell, the Whigs hit at the very heart of the Stuart monarchy.

It was claimed by the Whigs that only an act of Parliament had "settled" the Crown on Anne,68 and that "if the Resistance at the Revolution was illegal," they went on to say, then the Glorious Revolution "was settled in usurpation, and this act can have no greater force and authority than an act passed under an usurper."69

The Whig prosecutors stated that the "nature of our Constitution is that of a limited monarchy,"70 and they spoke of "an original con-
tract between the Crown and the people": if the contract is broken by the Crown, "the right of allegiance ceases." Needless to say, the Whigs did not further endear themselves to the Queen by such legalistic arguments.

The Queen's attitude towards this whole incident remains something of an enigma. She attended the first two days of the trial and, although she told Bishop Burnet privately that Sacheverell should be punished for his "bad sermon," Anne was devoted to the High Church, and it was rumored that she sympathized with Sacheverell.

Indeed, it was this feeling that the Queen favored a mild sentence for Sacheverell, combined with fear of physical danger from the London mob, that caused many members of the Lords to reconsider their positions on the impeachment. Sacheverell made their task somewhat easier by slightly modifying his own statements, saying that he had not intended to include the 1688 Revolution in his remarks concerning non-resistance, and that the Church of England could never be in danger under the benevolent rule of Queen Anne.

On March 20th, 1710, Sacheverell was found guilty by the Lords on the charges specified, but by the narrow margin of 69 votes to 52. Three days later, the sentence against him was pronounced: he was to be suspended from preaching for a period of three years, but he could perform other clerical functions (e.g., read prayers, perform christenings); and his sermons of August and November were to be burned publicly by the hangman.
Such a mild sentence, passed by such a narrow margin, represented a moral victory for Sacheverell, the High Church, and the Tories. News of the light sentence caused jubilation and "inconceivable gladness": "bonfires, illuminations, and other marks of joy appeared, not only in London, but over the whole kingdom." Each public appearance by Sacheverell resembled a royal procession.

More importantly, the Whig Government had been seriously damaged, and the Queen felt that she could now, with the support of public opinion, move against her hated ministry. Two weeks after the trial ended, Anne and Sarah Churchill had a bitter, acrimonious meeting, the last ever between the two women, as Sarah was, in effect, banished from Court. In June, Anne dismissed her "bête noire", the despised Sunderland; in August, she dismissed Godolphin himself, who had three decades of virtually unbroken service in the Treasury, dating from the reign of Charles II. Godolphin was removed from office by the Queen—without the courtesy of an interview, or even a note of gratitude for his long years of service—"as a squire would discharge a cheating bailiff."

The Whig Junto resigned on September 21st, 1710, setting a precedent of the "cabinet" resigning in toto. General elections were held in October with the Tories appealing for a new Parliament which would be "faithful to the Crown and zealous for the Church." The Tories used the Church issue heavily: "the heat of a man's zeal for Sacheverell was made the test of his suitability as a candidate."
Burnet reported that "unheard of methods" of violence and intimidation were used to prevent people from voting Whig (in an age when the secret ballot was unknown), tactics of obstruction which he blamed on the Tory gentry and the Anglican clergy. Regardless of the tactics employed, the Tories won a massive victory, and a new Tory ministry, under Harley and Henry St. John, came to power.
IV

CONCLUSION

In the year following the Tory victory, both the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough were stripped of all their offices and positions. With Marlborough no longer pressing the fight against France, the Tories began negotiations for a peace settlement which would end the long conflict on the Continent. The Queen created enough new Tory peers to insure that the peace treaty would pass the House of Lords, which it did in 1713 as the Treaty of Utrecht.

Thus, the result of the Sacheverell Affair was not only the collapse of the Whig ministry and the rise of the Tories, but the end of British involvement in the struggle against Louis XIV. This is not to say that the Sacheverell incident was entirely responsible for this political upheaval, but it is safe to speculate that without the Sacheverell issue, the changes would not have been as drastic.

It is highly probable that, due to taxation and war-weariness, the Whigs would have suffered some losses at the next election, but they would not have been so completely trounced, and the Tories would not have enjoyed such popular support. Nor, without the emotional furor aroused by Sacheverell, would Anne have been so emboldened as to act against the Marlborough-Godolphin-Whig Junto faction. Sacheverell was merely the spark which released these latent forces.

As for the good Dr. Sacheverell, he was appointed by the Queen to a lucrative living at Holborn, as Rector of St. Andrew's, where, in
due course, he married a wealthy widow and spent his remaining years in comfortable anonymity. Perhaps the most succinct analysis of this whole affair was provided by Robert Harley's sister, who, in a letter to him, wrote: "What is mankind that a nonsensical harangue from a pragmatical, insignificant man should make such terrible work."
FOOTNOTES


4Gilbert Burnet, History of His Own Time (London, 1875), 857.

5Rowse, op. cit., 249-250.


7For an analysis of this question of the Church, see: G. V. Bennett, "Robert Harley, the Godolphin ministry, and bishoprics crisis of 1707," English Historical Review, LXXXII (Oct., 1967), 726-746.

8Burnet, op. cit., 816.


11Ibid., 34.

12Ibid., 37.


14Ibid., 189.

15Ibid., 186.

16Feiling, op. cit., 368.

17Ibid., 405.


21 Ibid., 26.
22 Ibid., 27.
23 Ibid., 28-31.

26 Ibid., 71.
27 Ibid., 73.
28 Ibid., 75.
29 Ibid., 80-81.
30 Churchill, op. cit., 222.
31 Howell's State Trials, op. cit., 78.
32 Ibid., 83.
33 Ibid., 87.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 90.
36 Scudi, op. cit., 36.
37 Hearne's Remarks, op. cit., 327.
38 Churchill, op. cit., 211.
39 Howell's State Trials, op. cit., 1-3.
40 Ibid., 2.
41 Ibid., 9.
42 Ibid.
43 Burnet, op. cit., 848.


45 Howell's State Trials, op. cit., 15.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 16.

48 Ibid., 38-40.

49 Burnet, op. cit., 848.

50 Hearne's Remarks, op. cit., 343-344.

51 Burnet, op. cit., 848.


53 Scudi, op. cit., 73.

54 Ibid., 46-47.

55 Duchess of Marlborough, op. cit., 135.

56 Ibid., 136.

57 Hill, op. cit., 296.

58 Scudi, op. cit., 62.

59 Burnet, op. cit., 848n.

60 Ibid., 849.

61 Hearne's Remarks, op. cit., 350.

62 Ibid.

63 Scudi, op. cit., 11.

64 Burnet, op. cit., 849; Hearne's Remarks, op. cit., 351.

65 Burnet, op. cit., 849.

67 Trevelyan, op. cit., 57.
68 Howell's State Trials, op. cit., 109.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 61.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid., 61-62.
73 Hearne's Remarks, op. cit., 350.
74 Burnet, op. cit., 850.
75 Feiling, op. cit., 362.
76 Burnet, op. cit., 850.
77 Ibid., 851.
78 Howell's State Trials, op. cit., 366.
79 Ibid., 369.
80 Ibid., 468-470.
81 Ibid., 474.
82 Burnet, op. cit., 852.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid., 856.
86 Trevelyan, op. cit., 66.
87 Scudi, op. cit., 135.
88 Burnet, op. cit., 852.
89 Trevelyan, op. cit., 59.
90 Burnet, op. cit., 857.
91 Rowse, op. cit., 261-263.
92 Ibid., 263.

93 Scudi, *op. cit.*, 137.

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A. PRIMARY


B. SECONDARY

Bennett, G. V. "Robert Harley, the Godolphin ministry, and bishoprics crisis of 1707". English Historical Review, LXXXII (Oct. 1967), 726-746.


