

John Henry Williams
(1747-1829)

‘Political Clergyman’



WAR, THE FRENCH
REVOLUTION, AND THE
CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Colin Haydon

STUDIES IN MODERN BRITISH RELIGIOUS HISTORY

Volume 16

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War, the French Revolution, and the
Church of England

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THE BOYDELL PRESS

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To JDW,
who so consistently exhibits JHW's best qualities; and
In Memory of
T (1986–2005)

ILLUSTRATIONS

Jacket: John Henry Williams, sketch by Bertie Greatheed Jr (now in the possession of Mr Michael Heber-Percy)

Frontispiece: John Henry Williams, portrait by William Artaud

Page 38: The Church of St Peter at Wellesbourne, Warwickshire (reproduced by permission of English Heritage, National Monuments Record, B42/2,858)

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This short book is an offshoot of a larger project on which I am still engaged, a study of religion and society in south Warwickshire from c. 1660 to c. 1820. For that project, I determined to read all the relevant extant sermons and, of those, I was especially interested by four anti-war discourses which the Reverend John Henry Williams, the vicar of Wellesbourne from 1778 to 1829, preached and published in 1793, 1794, 1795, and 1802. When William Gibson and Robert G. Ingram kindly invited me to contribute to their volume on religion, society, and politics in Britain 1660–1832, I decided to produce an essay on Williams, focusing principally on those sermons.¹ Subsequently, I was able to persuade Brian, now Sir Brian, Harrison that Williams deserved an entry in the on-line version of *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. For that article, I needed to learn more about Williams as both a man and a clergyman, and the new information which I uncovered convinced me that it would be possible to write a book-length – though imperfect – study of Williams’ life, his work as a parson, and his involvement in politics. Just how imperfect this study is, readers will judge. One defect which I have endeavoured to avoid, however, is the imprint of recent politics on this book. Of course, it is currently impossible not to think of the war against Iraq, and its aftermath, when reading parts of Williams’ anti-war sermons (for example, his doubts as to whether ‘it is *lawful* to commit a *certain evil* with the prospect of an *uncertain good*’).² But, for the record, I began to study Williams in the late 1990s and delivered a paper on him at the Religion and Romantic (Re)Vision Conference 1780–1830 in Oxford in 2000 – before a second war against Iraq seemed even likely. In fact, when completing this book, my difficulty lay not in excluding Iraq from my thinking but rather in envisaging the conflict between Britain and revolutionary/Napoleonic France as it gradually unfolded to contemporaries, unable to anticipate its next twists and turns, not knowing its eventual outcome.³

¹ Colin Haydon, ‘The “most horrid and unnatural state of man”: John Henry Williams and the French Wars 1793–1802’, *Religious Identities in Britain 1660–1832*, ed. William Gibson and Robert G. Ingram (Aldershot, 2005), pp. 255–76.

² J. H. Williams, *War the Stumbling-block of a Christian; or, the Absurdity of Defending Religion by the Sword* (1795), p. 25.

³ Bertie Greatheed, Warwickshire landowner, playwright, and Williams’ closest friend, noted in his journal in 1812, ‘the great struggle between France & Russia is begun. I suppose the french slaves as heretofore will carry all before them.’ Warwickshire CRO, CR 1707/120, Entry, 18 July 1812.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have helped me while preparing and writing this book, and it is a pleasure to record my thanks to them.

First, I am grateful to the staff of the many archives and libraries in which I have worked, and, above all, to the archivists and librarians of the Bodleian Library, Oxford, the British Library, and the Warwickshire County Record Office, where the greatest portion of my research was undertaken. I should also wish to thank the archivists of three Oxford colleges for permitting me to consult records in their care: Judith Curthoys at Christ Church, Ellena Pike and Lucie Walker at Pembroke College, and Julian Reid at Merton College.

I wish to record my gratitude to Melanie Barber, David Evans, Peter Forsaith, Mike Rogers, Marion Symonds, and Susan Wollenberg, all of whom answered a number of specialized questions.

At the University of Winchester, I am grateful to Helen Betts and Michael Hicks for granting me a prolonged sabbatical; to my colleagues in the History Department who gave me time to pierce the veil; and to the staff of the Martial Rose Library, who obtained numerous works on inter-library loan for me.

My sabbatical was extended by the award of an Arts and Humanities Research Council grant, and I should like to thank the Council (and the two anonymous assessors who refereed the project) for this. Without this grant, the book could not have been completed so quickly.

Other people have given me much practical assistance. The enormously generous hospitality of Fred and Rosemary Marcus in Oxford has permitted me to work in the Bodleian Library in a sustained and fruitful way. Matthew Acland and Susan Campbell photocopied source material for me. Stephen Smith kindly drove me to various places where Williams lived. Malcolm Henson produced the index with great speed and precision. Moreover, I doubt if the work would have been finished so quickly without pleasant interludes with Rees and Laura Jenkins and Mark and Sophie Tilden in Devon, and with Adrian Beard and Alan and Caroline Bishop in the Land of the Mountain and the Flood and the Land of the Mountain and the Bog.

At Boydell & Brewer, I am grateful to the general editors of *Studies in Modern British Religious History* for supporting my proposal for a book-length study of John Henry Williams, and especially to Stephen Taylor, who read and commented on the whole text. I wish, too, to record my thanks to Peter Clifford, who agreed to publish the book; to Vanda Andrews, who organized the book's production, and Caroline Palmer and Anna Morton, who oversaw the entire project; to Judith Oppenheimer, my copy editor; and to Pru Harrison, my typesetter, and Helen Barber, who designed the jacket.

The cover illustration is a reproduction of a sketch of John Henry Williams by the son of Williams' friend Bertie Greatheed of Guy's Cliffe, Warwickshire. It, and other sketches of the Williams family, are now in the possession of Mr Michael Heber-Percy, and I am greatly obliged to him for first allowing me to see them and for later granting me permission to reproduce the sketch of Williams. The frontispiece shows William Artaud's portrait of John Henry Williams, and I

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

am likewise obliged to its current owner, who wishes to remain anonymous, for permission to reproduce it here. Phil Marter photographed the sketch and the portrait for me.

Many friends have given sustaining encouragement while I worked on this project: in particular, Chris Aldous, Mark Allen, Nigel Aston, Jeremy Black, Clive Bond, Bernard Capp, Utrick Casebourne, Neil Curtin, Grayson Ditchfield, Liz Fox, Monica Gale, Lawrence Goldman, Jeremy Gregory, Jan and Mark Housby, Paul Langford, Tom Lawson, Jean Morrin, Peter Nockles, Frank O’Gorman, Laretta Peters, David Scourfield, Mark Smith, Pat Thompson, Kate Tiller, Will Van Reyk, John Walsh, Blair Worden, and Barbara Yorke. I thank them all.

Sir Nikolaus Pevsner dedicated one of his *Buildings of England* volumes to ‘the inventor of the iced lolly’. Perhaps I should have dedicated this book to the inventors of the word-processor, e-mail, and the world-wide web, all of whom have so greatly eased the task of historians. However, it is more pleasing, and fitting, to acknowledge two far greater obligations in the dedication.

Colin Haydon,
Winchester,
May 2007

ABBREVIATIONS

Add. MS	Additional Manuscript
BL	British Library, London
Bodleian L	Bodleian Library, Oxford
CRO	County Record Office
L	Library
LPL	Lambeth Palace Library
<i>ODNB</i>	H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, eds, <i>The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i> (Oxford, 2004)
RO	Record Office
TNA	The National Archives, Kew
<i>VCH</i>	<i>The Victoria History of the Counties of England</i>

EDITORIAL NOTE

In quotations from contemporary sources, I have retained the original spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. I have italicized words underlined in manuscripts.

Dates before the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in 1752 are given in the Old Style – except that the year is taken to have started on 1 January.

Unless otherwise stated, the place of publication in references and the bibliography is London.

Chapter One

THE GRAVE AND THE MEMORY

The Churchyard at Wellesbourne

John Henry Williams was vicar of Wellesbourne in Warwickshire for over fifty years. He died on 12 May 1829 at Leamington, and, six days later, when his body had been brought back to Wellesbourne, his funeral was conducted at the church, St Peter's, which he had served so faithfully. He was buried in the graveyard, by the church porch.¹ If one visits Wellesbourne today, his resting place is easily overlooked: the worn, dingy horizontal slab which marks it has no decoration, no laudatory epitaph, only the simple inscription 'IHW 1829', the letters and numbers thick with moss.

Williams' inconspicuous grave is symbolic of his diminished reputation. The year before Williams' death, William Field, the prominent Unitarian minister and writer, stated that the Vicar of Wellesbourne might 'justly claim a distinguished place among the most enlightened and liberal clergymen of his time'.² Williams was, Field continued, 'honourably known to the public, by . . . [his] admirable sermons' – sermons which, preached and published in 1793, 1794, 1795, and 1802, eloquently denounced the war against revolutionary France.³ The celebrated pedagogue, cleric, and writer Dr Samuel Parr, who knew Williams well, 'often spoke of him in terms of fervent admiration and esteem'.⁴ Yet, when Williams died, *The Gentleman's Magazine* baldly recorded, under 'Clergy Deceased', 'Aged 82, the Rev. *John Henry Williams*' (and noted his Oxford college affiliations less than accurately).⁵ Locally, the *Leamington Spa Courier* just stated – in very small print – 'DIED. – On Tuesday, the 12th inst., aged 82, the Rev. J. H. Williams, Vicar of Wellsbourne [*sic*]'.⁶

Historians have largely neglected Williams' life and publications. In 1870, Frederick Leigh Colville published *The Worthies of Warwickshire who Lived*

¹ Worcestershire RO, BA 2,245/24, Ref. S132–8, p. 41, No. 326.

² William Field, *Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Opinions of the Rev. Samuel Parr, LL.D.*, I (1828), p. 206.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *The Gentleman's Magazine* xcix, Part ii (1829), p. 90.

⁶ *Leamington Spa Courier*, 16 May 1829.

between 1500 and 1800. Colville knew of Williams' career,⁷ but he did not include an account of it in his compendious work – though he included the lives of Williams' closest friend, Bertie Greatheed of Guy's Cliffe, near Warwick, and Samuel Parr (who, living at Hatton, was Williams' and Greatheed's neighbour).⁸ Warren Derry did not discuss the friendship of Williams and Parr in his biography of the latter, published in 1966.⁹ Even in his fine survey of English anti-war liberalism from 1793 to 1815, *The Friends of Peace* (1982), J. E. Cookson does not examine Williams' 'admirable sermons' separately from other comparable publications, but rather subsumes arguments from the 1793, 1794, and 1795 discourses into the book's general treatment.¹⁰

It was Nancy Uhlar Murray's influential 1975 doctoral thesis which identified Williams' importance in the anti-war debates in the period 1793–1802.¹¹ In it, Murray investigated the French Revolution's impact on the English churches, and she concluded that, judging by the published evidence, Williams 'stood alone among [Anglican] clergymen in consistently and openly attacking the war during successive public fast services'.¹² Citing her thesis, Martin Ceadel, in *The Origins of War Prevention* (1996), likewise draws attention to Williams' brave stance, though he slightly (and rightly) tempers Murray's praise by noting the limits to Williams' anti-war arguments.¹³ Emma Vincent Macleod's study of British attitudes to the conflict with revolutionary France, published in 1998, depicts Williams as seemingly the most vocal of the small minority of Anglican clerics that denounced the war.¹⁴ Nonetheless, given the overall scope of their studies, Murray, Ceadel, and Macleod could devote little space to Williams' ideas. The comments of Ceadel and Macleod fill less than half a page; Ceadel explicitly examines only one of Williams' sermons, Macleod two. Robert Hole's examination of preaching and politics from 1760 to 1832, published in 1989, notes Williams' thinking, but the analysis is, again, necessarily fleeting.¹⁵

If Williams was indeed one of 'the most enlightened and liberal clergymen of his time', his career and writings would seem to merit more than a few brief comments in works exploring broad themes. Of course, William Field was not an

⁷ Frederick Leigh Colville, *The Worthies of Warwickshire who Lived between 1500 and 1800* (Warwick and London, [1870]), p. 321.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 320–3, 564–70.

⁹ Warren Derry, *Dr Parr* (1966).

¹⁰ J. E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace: Anti-War Liberalism in England 1793–1815* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 297, 298.

¹¹ Nancy Uhlar Murray, 'The Influence of the French Revolution on the Church of England and its Rivals 1789–1802', University of Oxford DPhil thesis, 1975, pp. 87, 98.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹³ Martin Ceadel, *The Origins of War Prevention* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 159–60. 'Williams was merely arguing that no war could be considered *holy* – admittedly, a controversial point for an Anglican clergyman to choose to make in wartime' (*ibid.*, p. 160).

¹⁴ Emma Vincent Macleod, *A War of Ideas: British Attitudes to the Wars against Revolutionary France 1792–1802* (Aldershot, 1998), pp. 148–9.

¹⁵ Robert Hole, *Pulpits, Politics, and Public Order in England 1760–1832* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 145–6, 149.

impartial witness: he had good reasons for gratitude to Williams (while, when ‘Parr felt as a friend, he was much too apt to speak and write as a panegyrist’).¹⁶ But Williams’ political publications – displaying, in Field’s words, ‘the united powers of argument and eloquence’¹⁷ – deserve thorough consideration, as does the career of the man who stood ‘alone among [the established Church’s] clergymen’ in his unwavering opposition to the conflict of 1793–1802. Moreover, Williams’ life as a parish parson, his theological convictions, and his pastoral endeavours merit sustained examination. His ministry of nearly sixty years, at Wellesbourne and elsewhere, was far more important to him than his comparatively shortlived forays into political debate, and it was his religious principles which guided, indeed largely moulded, his political reasoning.

Unfashionable Subjects

One principal reason for the scholarly neglect of careers like Williams’ is clear: until recently, there was little interest in the Hanoverian Church, and, during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, in religious history more generally.

Victorian writers smugly – and anachronistically – found much to condemn in the Hanoverian Church because it failed to conform to their standards and vision. Evangelicals deplored its rejection of Wesley, Whitefield, and their followers, while, for High Churchmen, the years between the Caroline divines and the Oxford Movement constituted a slump in the Church’s fortunes. In their 1906 survey of the Church’s history from 1714 to 1800, J. H. Overton and F. Relton reiterated the wider charges: the age was one, they stated, ‘of lethargy instead of activity, of worldliness instead of spirituality, of self-seeking instead of self-denial, of grossness instead of refinement’.¹⁸ There persists today the influential stereotype of the Georgian parson: grasping and selfish, port-soaked, gouty, and bigoted, caring more for his tithes than his parishioners, and enhancing his income, whenever possible, through pluralism. This caricature, ultimately derived from attacks by jaundiced sceptics like Gibbon, anti-clerical radicals like John Wade, and vicious cartoons, is unhelpful; but some modern scholars remain critical of a Church which, in their eyes, delayed the implementation of much-needed administrative reforms until the 1830s.¹⁹ Even Norman Sykes, whose *Church and State in England in the Eighteenth Century* (1934) did so much to rehabilitate the Georgian Church’s reputation, diagnosed a gradual calcification in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.²⁰ Sykes’ view of

¹⁶ See below, pp. 81–2; Richard Warner, *Literary Recollections*, II (1830), p. 477.

¹⁷ Field, *Parr*, I, p. 206.

¹⁸ John H. Overton and Frederic Relton, *The English Church from the Accession of George I to the End of the Eighteenth Century (1714–1800)* (1906), p. 1.

¹⁹ E.g., Peter Virgin, *The Church in an Age of Negligence* (Cambridge, 1989).

²⁰ Norman Sykes, *Church and State in England in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1934), pp. 407, 409.

Parson Woodforde as ‘representative of the [period’s] country clergy’ is also disconcerting.²¹ For if Woodforde, keeping the noiseless tenor of his way in his Norfolk backwater, seems a decent and affable man, his piety, while firm, appears limited and uninspiring, and his concern for his flock shallow, rarely going beyond the strict call of duty.²²

For left-wing historians from the 1960s to the 1990s, mere sloth was not the Georgian Church’s besetting sin. That was rather its nexus with the state and its rulers. The Church was easily presented as the handmaiden of a state which treated the lower orders harshly, and the clergy pilloried as toadies to the rich, the beneficiaries of, and apologists for, an unjust *status quo*. Parsons were depicted as parasitic on the labouring classes. When land was enclosed, did they hesitate to enhance their incomes by driving hard bargains over tithe commutation? In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as food prices rocketed, did they hesitate to extract increasingly valuable tithes from increasingly impoverished families? In those years, did not the number of clerical magistrates grow, so that ‘squarsons’ routinely enforced a harsh penal code, and, notoriously, the severe game laws? More generally, of course, left-wing historians scorned to examine religion autonomously, and declined to engage seriously with religious thinking *per se*. In their eyes, religion was false consciousness, conjured by economic and social imperatives, and a confidence trick to drill the masses into doltish obedience.²³ Why study, such a historian could understandably ask, the purveyors of discredited, baneful merchandise, like John Henry Williams? Why investigate their political stance, given its seemingly easy predictability?

It is equally unsurprising that historians have shown little interest in the British opponents of the wars against revolutionary France and Napoleon. Notoriously, historians tend to investigate most thoroughly the lives of successful figures and the rise and development of successful movements. They pay less, or little, attention to the careers of those who failed, the course of declining movements, the might-have-beens of the past. Certainly, those who decried the wars from 1793 to 1802 and from 1803 to 1815 backed the wrong horse. These were epic, and ultimately triumphant, wars. To fight them, successive governments organized an unprecedented mobilization of manpower for the army, navy, militia, and volunteer bodies. The wars’ financial costs were vast but the administrations met them through efficient taxation and skilful borrowing. Trafalgar remains Britain’s most celebrated naval victory, while, in popular perception, Waterloo surely out-tops Cr  cy, Agincourt, and Blenheim. In 1815, Britain was both the vanquisher of Napoleon and, definitively, the victor in the ‘second hundred years’ war’ against France. And, since the wars had been fought not only in Europe but also in India,

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

²² R. L. Winstanley, ‘Woodforde, James (1740–1803)’, *ODNB*, LX, p. 181.

²³ E.g., Robert W. Malcolmson, *Life and Labour in England 1700–1780* (1981), pp. 83–5; Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, 1982), pp. 188–91; E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (1991), p. 32.

South Africa, South America, and the West Indies, Britain made global gains by 1815 – in Africa, in the Caribbean, in India – and continued her imperial expansion in the 1820s. The ‘fiscal–military’ state, created after 1688 and now showing its full vigour, was amazingly effective.²⁴ Moreover, Linda Colley argues that the years from 1793 to 1815 witnessed, a century after the Union of 1707, the full emergence of a British identity shared by the English, Scots, and Welsh. The stoking of patriotism and huge pride in victories and imperial expansion, together with a common Protestantism, had ‘forged the nation’.²⁵

Any grand narrative is naturally open to criticism. From the vantage-ground of Waterloo, it is easy to overlook or forget Britain’s exhaustion in 1802, how advantageous the Peace of Amiens was to France, and how deleterious to the British,²⁶ the inept Convention of Cintra of 1808,²⁷ and the disastrous Walcheren expedition of 1809. N. A. M. Rodger has stressed that Trafalgar did not save Britain from invasion in 1805 – by October, Napoleon’s plans for that had collapsed.²⁸ Peter Hofschröder has vigorously argued that Waterloo was a German, not a British, victory.²⁹ Nonetheless, it is doubtful whether historians’ qualifications and reassessments, valid or invalid, ever much adjust Churchillian perceptions. During Margaret Thatcher’s premiership, portraits of Nelson and Wellington hung in the dining room of 10 Downing Street, expressly calculated to overawe foreign visitors.³⁰ The two men pre-eminently personified Britain’s past glories on sea and land. Accordingly, it is understandable that those who opposed the wars of 1793–1802 and 1803–15 – the prelude to Britain’s century of world dominance – have rarely attracted attention. These men appear foolish and backward-looking. J. E. Cookson admits that they rarely influenced government decisions;³¹ and one might question whether the ineffectual merit study. Moreover, the number of men like John Henry Williams was small. The anti-war Christian ‘minority view had a sound intellectual base’, and its advocates were ‘well organized and vocal, not to say vociferous’, Dr Hole notes. But they constituted ‘a minority of Christians, and an even smaller minority of trinitarian Christians’.³²

²⁴ Martin Dauntton, ‘The Fiscal–Military State and the Napoleonic Wars: Britain and France Compared’, *Trafalgar in History*, ed. David Cannadine (Basingstoke, 2006), pp. 18–43. By 1815, as Miles Taylor observes, the empire reflected ‘Britain’s global-power status, rather than her benign and humanitarian instincts as a trading and colonizing people’: *Wellington’s World: The Duke of Wellington and the Making of the British Empire* (Southampton, 2003), p. 10.

²⁵ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven and London, 1992).

²⁶ By the treaty, France retained nearly all her Continental conquests, whereas Britain lost nearly all her overseas gains.

²⁷ Following Wellesley’s victory at Vimeiro, the agreement permitted Junot’s defeated forces to return to France.

²⁸ N. A. M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain 1649–1815* (2004), p. 543. However, Rodger, unlike some modern historians, emphasizes the long-term importance of the battle (ibid.).

²⁹ Peter Hofschröder, *1815, The Waterloo Campaign: The German Victory – from Waterloo to the Fall of Napoleon* (1999).

³⁰ Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (1993), p. 24.

³¹ Cookson, *Friends of Peace*, pp. 257–8.

³² Hole, *Pulpits, Politics, and Public Order*, p. 149.