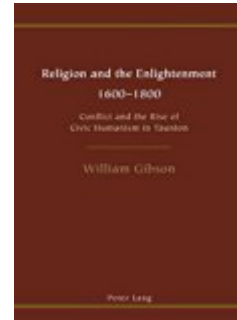


William Gibson. *Religion and the Enlightenment 1600-1800: Conflict and the Rise of Civic Humanism in Taunton.* Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007. 385 pp. \$71.95, paper, ISBN 978-3-03910-922-7.



Reviewed by Joanna Cruickshank

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Commissioned by David S. Karr (Columbia College)

William Gibson's finely drawn study of political and religious change in the town of Taunton provides an excellent example of the insights that local histories can bring to major historical debates. Taunton was, of course, no ordinary town. Famously a "Bastion of Puritanism," it played an important role in the conflicts of the Civil War. After the Restoration, the town rose twice in rebellion against the government, earning its reputation as "the Nursery of Rebellion." And yet, by the end of the eighteenth century, the people of Taunton had largely forsaken violence as a means of bringing about political change, favoring instead the ballot box, the hustings, and the petition. To understand this transformation, Gibson argues, we must take seriously the role of religion in shaping the beliefs and practices of Taunton's citizens.

Gibson has constructed a lively and very readable narrative of the changing social landscape of Taunton during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He attributes the political

volatility of Taunton in the seventeenth century to the combination of the significant but unstable wool trade and a deep commitment to Puritanism—economic and religious factors that interacted in complicated but clearly significant ways. The siege of Taunton by Royalist forces in 1645, at the height of the Civil War, created a powerful tradition of collective dissent, which was deliberately invoked to encourage ongoing resistance to the church and state where they appeared to infringe on Taunton's liberties. In the eighteenth century, the wool trade suffered a severe decline and the Whigs dominated in parliamentary elections.

The great strength of this book is Gibson's detailed account of the Dissenting ministers who gathered at Taunton. He traces the changing theologies of this group, from uncompromising Puritanism to a moderate Nonconformism. This shift had significance well beyond the town, through both individual ministers and the Taunton Academy, one of the earliest and most influential of the Dissenting academies. In the years after the Glori-

ous Revolution, the series of ministers who ran the academy taught an increasingly tolerant, liberal, and eventually heterodox theology to generations of students. As Gibson shows, these students spread "like spores" through English Dissent, carrying with them a "gospel message of reason, tolerance and enlightenment" (p. 274). He also demonstrates the strength and importance of the alliance--and often overlap--between the Whig and Dissenting cause in Taunton. Although not surprising, this alliance provides significant support for his argument that political change in Taunton had religious roots, as the Dissenting leadership promoted Whig politicians and ideals.

Together, this explanation of the changing values of the Dissenting leadership in Taunton and its coalescence with Whig political aims contributes to the wider debate about religion in the eighteenth century, supporting the claim that "Enlightenment" values spread in England not primarily as a result of the decline of religion, but as part of religious conviction and practice. Theologians might ask if the resulting "moderate, rational and enlightened Christianity" represented a diversion from Christian orthodoxy, and historians of a more Marxist persuasion might question whether it produced political progress for the mass of Taunton's people. Nonetheless, as Gibson rightly argues, the assumption that religion could motivate people to violence and rebellion but not to tolerance and moderation is a "condescension of history" undermined by the Taunton story (p. 19).

Less thoroughly convincing is Gibson's claim that ordinary citizens of Taunton embraced "a constitutional model of achieving change" because of the preaching they heard week by week in Taunton's churches (p. 19). The behavior of Taunton's citizens was at times unpredictable--having fiercely resisted the Royalist cause during the Civil War, many celebrated the restoration of the king and a huge crowd attended the first orthodox Anglican service held in the town in 1662.

As Gibson freely admits, it is extremely difficult to prove that the decreasing levels of popular political violence in Taunton were a direct result of the spread of "Enlightenment" Christianity. Given his claim that this was the case, however, it would have been fruitful to consider the behavior of Taunton's populace in light of broader arguments about changing patterns of popular violence and political activism in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, as advanced by Adrian Randall and Andrew Charlesworth in *Markets, Market Culture and Popular Protest in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (1996), Robert Shoemaker in *The London Mob: Violence and Disorder in Eighteenth-Century England* (2004), Ian Gilmour in *Riots, Risings and Revolution: Governance and Violence in Eighteenth-Century England* (1992), and others.

Overall, however, this is a rich and engaging history, which illuminates the changing fortunes of a fascinating town, as well as contributing to ongoing debates about religion, politics, and "the Enlightenment" in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England.

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