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Ralph Stevens. *Protestant Pluralism: The Reception of the Toleration Act, 1689-1720.* Studies in Modern British Religious History Series. Rochester: Boydell Press, 2018. 220 pp. $115.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78327-329-4.

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Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer College)

Ralph Stevens has written the first detailed study of the practical consequences of the Toleration Act for the three decades after the 1688 Revolution. As Stevens remarks, historians have in recent years downplayed the significance of the act, noting that its terms were ungenerous and limited and that Roman Catholics and those who denied the Trinity were specifically excluded from the relief it offered. The act has also been considered largely in terms of its influence on the development of Dissent. Stevens, however, is principally concerned with how the Church of England and its supporters reacted to the breach in the Anglican religious monopoly and the challenge of religious pluralism. For Stevens, the Toleration Act was limited in scope and silent on key issues and therefore fundamentally ambiguous, creating many practical difficulties for the Church of England and its clergy. He argues that because of the severe limitations in the clauses of the act, there was genuine confusion among many clergymen over how far the liberties enjoyed by Dissenters extended. But as he acknowledges the difficulty was largely because the Toleration Act was never intended to extend to the whole of Dissent.

There were originally two bills: one for comprehension, offering sufficient concessions over liturgy and ordination to allow the majority of Dissenters to be readmitted to the Church of England, and the other providing a bare toleration for Independents, Quakers, and Baptists who rejected any accommodation with a national church. The Comprehension Bill was lost. The Presbyterians, the largest and most influential body of Dissenters, were therefore forced to rely on the Toleration Act, not only for their freedom to worship in public but also for a way to justify their involvement in politics and public life generally. Inevitably they came to interpret the act in the widest possible terms, as permitting them to take part in all areas except those actually proscribed by the act. In many ways, Dissent after 1689 was defined not so much by the Toleration Act as the failure of comprehension. It is the reaction of the Church of England and its supporters to the presumption by the Presbyterians that the Toleration Act allowed sufficient latitude to accommodate their political and religious aspirations that primarily interests Stevens. He also makes clear he is concerned not with the Baptists and Quakers, for whom the Toleration Act was intended, but with the Presbyterians, the main losers from the failure of comprehension. The heart of his study is thus concerned with the consequences of the loss of comprehension and the weight of expectation placed on the Toleration Act.

Surprisingly comprehension is not mentioned once in the introduction. Stevens has chosen to showcase the Toleration Act, but he has risked confusing the reader and creating a misleading impression that the problems with the act were due to poor draftsmanship rather than the unexpected failure of comprehension. The introduction is followed by a chapter on the political background to the act. This represents something of a missed opportunity. The book would have been strengthened if Stevens had provided a detailed account of the debates in Parliament over the two bills, for it would have made clear what the loss of comprehension meant. Some consideration of the earlier attempts at toleration, especially in James II's reign would have further helped the reader to understand the limitations of the 1689 act. Thirty years ago, Bill Speck pointed out in ***The Reluctant Revolutionaries: Englishmen and the Revolution of 1688*** (1988) that the religious freedom James II granted in the last years of his reign was far greater than that offered by the Toleration Act. The account of Dissent is too brief. Although the book is about the Anglican reaction, more discussion of Dissent and the numbers involved is needed. It is difficult to count Dissenters in this period, but the rapid growth of Dissent after 1689 is clear: both the settling of existing meetings and especially the setting up of many new ones. Furthermore, in ***Religion, Revolution, and English Radicalism: Nonconformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society*** (1990), James A. Bradley has identified the considerable political influence that Dissenters exerted at elections. This is what Stevens's churchmen were reacting to, and their fears and anger as a consequence can be more easily understood.

The strengths of the volume are the five chapters that follow, which provide detailed case studies of the main areas of involvement by Dissenters in the public and religious life of the country made possible by the Toleration Act. Stevens's chapters cover both the familiar and the unfamiliar, but in each case he has new and interesting things to say.

As Stevens rightly points out, the main battlefield between the church and Dissent was over the practice of Occasional Conformity, which so outraged High Churchmen. It was for them an abominable hypocrisy, a perversion of the sacred sacrament, and it mattered politically. The control by Dissenters of many of the boroughs that returned members to Parliament was an important part of the political support for the Whig Party. Education proved an equally controversial subject, since by allowing Dissenters to educate their own children and ministers it was seen as perpetuating the schism with the church. The authorities had little hesitation in pursuing unlicensed teachers rigorously as a result. Yet Stevens suggests uncertainty over the legal position because of the Toleration Act led even Archbishop Sharp of York to be cautious in advising his subordinates. Stevens's account is supported by new archival evidence: the result of much hard work among the ecclesiastical records. He is also excellent in discussing the legal position.

Stevens has also taken a fresh look at the short-lived Societies for the Reformation of Manners. They proved controversial because of both the involvement of Dissenters and the use of secular rather than ecclesiastical courts to discipline offenders. Understandably, the presentment of nominal Anglicans for drinking on the Sabbath by a Dissenter who did not attend parish worship either was highly provocative. Stevens sees their failure, despite the goodwill of certain bishops and some of the clergy, because opponents saw the involvement of Dissenters as giving legitimacy to Dissent. For many churchmen, the sin of schism made Dissenters unfit to engage in moral reform for it hardened the hearts of the profane and prevented the church from disciplining offenders by fatally undermining ecclesiastical authority. The clergy often complained that if they attempted to

discipline a parishioner they would simply fly to the Dissenters.

The final two chapters are exceptional in identifying areas of conflict between the church and Dissent, which have only been briefly touched on in the past. Baptism might seem a surprising area of contention between churchmen and Dissenters, but it was central since it conferred church membership. Stevens points to the uncertainty caused by the Toleration Act, which recognized Baptist scruples by permitting them to omit the subscription on infant baptism. But Stevens demonstrates for the first time that the clergy, bitter at any encroachment by Dissenting ministers on their pastoral function, held a strict interpretation of the Toleration Act. They argued that Dissenters could only preach and had no indulgence to perform any other ministerial office. In practice, the clergy found if they refused to sanction private baptisms or attempted to enforce the obligation to have godparents, the child would be taken to the Presbyterian minister instead. A major controversy over baptism occurred when it was seized on by "High Flying" Churchmen to attack the status of Presbyterian ministers. Henry Cantrell, vicar of St Alkmund's, Derby, led the clergy of the town in refusing to bury children who had not been baptized by an episcopally ordained minister. The Presbyterians were forced to provide their own burial ground adjoining the meetinghouse, inevitably forcing a greater separation from the church. But claims that lay baptisms by unqualified persons were invalid contradicted canon law and put Cantrell and others on a collision course with their diocesans. The controversy also proved politically dangerous, since King William and King George had clearly not been baptized by an Anglican minister.

The last subject Stevens discusses is the use by Dissenters of the many chapels of ease found in the huge northern parishes. As he points out this is one of the least studied aspects of toleration. Many chapels were retained by the nonconformist congregation after 1662, despite the ejection of their minister. Dissenters used registration under the Toleration Act to legitimize their use. After often lengthy campaigns, the church enjoyed almost complete success in seizing back these chapels, but while they gained the building they lost the congregation that refused to conform, and instead left to build their own meetinghouse. Stevens's study of both chapels and baptism suggests the church contributed significantly to the final breach with moderate Dissent, by forcing partial conformists to decide where their ultimate loyalties lay.

By examining the Church of England's reaction to the Toleration Act, Stevens adds significantly to our understanding of the act and its impact on religion and politics in the three decades after 1689. The only serious criticism relates to the introduction and opening chapter, which could have offered the reader clearer direction. Nevertheless, Stevens's original approach and very well-researched book yields important new insights which historians will want to consider.

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