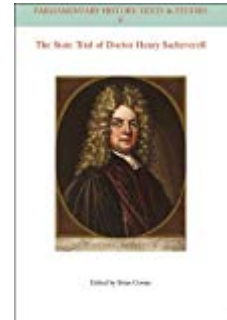


**Brian Cowan.** *The State Trial of Doctor Henry Sacheverell.* Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. Illustrations. xiii + 307 pp. \$49.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-4443-3223-0.



**Reviewed by** Scott Sowerby

**Published on** H-Albion (August, 2014)

**Commissioned by** Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer College)

We live in an age of public figures who have made themselves famous by being provocative. In contemporary politics, this phenomenon is especially familiar on the right, and it was the same in the early eighteenth century. Dr. Henry Sacheverell was the Sarah Palin of his day. We see the same deliberately extreme rhetoric and claims that traditional life is in danger from radical forces. We see the same innovative use of media technologies to spread a reactionary message. We see the same boredom with provincial posts and restless desire for the limelight. Both the doctor and the governor refused to bend to criticism; instead, they thrived on it. Both were quick to present themselves as persecuted for their beliefs. Both had legions of adoring fans who saw any doubts about their hero as apostasy. Both knew exactly which words and phrases would drive their opponents wild, and neither hesitated to use them. In short, both had the means to set a nation on fire.

Sacheverell, doctor of divinity and chaplain at St. Saviour's, Southwark, was a minor official in

the Church of England. He is chiefly interesting for the outsize reactions his words provoked. His infamous sermon of November 5, 1709, *The Perils of False Brethren, Both in Church and State*, sold at least fifty thousand copies, and perhaps as many as one hundred thousand copies. The sermon took a provocative stand in defense of the Church of England, asserting that true religion was in danger from the combined forces of non-conformists, skeptics, and Roman Catholics; implying that the 1689 Act of Toleration had done violence to the established church; denying that the Revolution of 1688–89 had legitimized the people's right to resist an unjust monarch; and suggesting that the current Whig government was threatening true religion. Whigs hated it; Tories loved it. When a Whig parliament in 1710 put the clergyman on trial for his incendiary statements, throngs of Tory partisans lined the streets from his London residence to the court at Westminster Hall. The doctor traveled to and from the court in a newly designed coach made of glass so that his followers could see him and cheer the more loud-

ly. The trial was the hottest ticket in London; as Brian Cowan notes, the receipts of London theaters dropped precipitously during the ten days of arguments. Hamlet and Ophelia paled in comparison with the doctor. The mood of the crowds grew ugly midway through the trial, and a night of rioting in London brought the destruction of six nonconformist meetinghouses. Although the doctor was convicted of high crimes and misdemeanors by a vote of the House of Lords, some of the peers got cold feet and the Whig leadership proved unable to push through a heavy penalty. The Lords voted only to suspend the doctor from preaching for three years and to have two of his sermons burned by the common hangman. This slap on the wrist was taken as a victory by Sacheverell's devotees, and wild celebrations ensued across England and Wales, which resulted in minor damage to a few more nonconformist meetinghouses. The public ferment over the doctor's trial put the Tories in a commanding position going into the next parliamentary elections, which they won resoundingly.

Cowan's erudite edition of primary sources charts contemporary reactions to the Sacheverell trial. Cowan sees the trial as an instance of the personalization of political ideas, as long-standing debates about church and state became "focused on *one* figure—Sacheverell, who could now be cast as either a hero or a scoundrel, depending upon one's politics" (p. 15, emphasis in original). Unlike so many studies of print culture that focus on production, this volume is attuned to reception, with reproductions of commonplace books and marginalia that alternately endorsed and disputed the standard printed accounts of the trial. Cowan's edition assembles sources from eleven libraries on two continents. Most of his selections are from unpublished manuscripts; five are from publications so rare that they are found in only one repository. The footnotes alone are worth the price of admission, providing a blow-by-blow account of the trial for the uninitiated. The volume is splendidly illustrated, with photographs of

manuscripts, satirical prints, engravings of Sacheverell's portrait, and depictions of the courtroom. The extended introduction surveys the history of printed transcripts of the trial, from Jacob Tonson's official record to competing accounts by Tory and Whig authors. A helpful timeline and a comprehensive biographical guide round out the edition.

The selection of sources can, of course, be criticized. The supposed speech by Sacheverell apologizing for the riots of his supporters is slight and, as Cowan frankly concedes, of dubious authenticity; it could easily have been left out. The value of the volume would have been enhanced had it included the detailed dispatches of Friedrich Bonet, the Prussian ambassador. But most of the sources are well chosen, and there is a limit to how much material it would have been possible to include. The most significant contribution is an anonymous account of the trial composed by a Tory author and held in the Beinecke Library at Yale University. It is here published for the first time. The source is not unknown, having been used extensively by Geoffrey Holmes in his 1973 *Trial of Doctor Sacheverell*. Its value lies chiefly in the fact that it is an eyewitness account of the trial that provides more color and commentary than the official version's dry transcription of the speeches. The other sources include a set of Whig marginalia commenting on Tonson's printed account of the trial, another collection of Whig marginalia criticizing an account by a Tory author, and a rare pamphlet providing an account of the debates in the House of Lords. Also included are a manuscript history of the trial by the Tory moderate Charles Burd, a Dutch list of the members of Parliament who voted for Sacheverell, and a broadside praising the doctor from the collections of the Countway Library at Harvard University. The edition concludes with an account of the debates in the House of Lords from the papers of the Earl of Shaftesbury, a collection of draft versions of Robert Walpole's speeches at the trial, a set of notes by the Earl of Nottingham, and ex-

cerpts from the letters of Ralph Bridges. The cumulative effect of these sources is to underscore, if any emphasis were necessary, the passion with which the political ideas that the doctor stood for were debated in Augustan London.

This book will be an invaluable resource for future scholars of Sacheverell and of the age whose political conflicts he captured and focused onto himself as he became, for one brief and shining moment, the symbol of all that was right, or all that was wrong, with England.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

**Citation:** Scott Sowerby. Review of Cowan, Brian. *The State Trial of Doctor Henry Sacheverell*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. August, 2014.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42134>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.