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The close scholarly attention paid to the early English Enlightenment in recent years has significantly deepened our understanding of the complex ebb and flow of ideas and arguments in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The simplistic and self-serving picture of a convergence of political institutions and political philosophy around key liberal principles—parliamentary sovereignty, religious toleration, and freedom of expression—no longer commands the respect of experts. Although the era of John Locke, the Glorious Revolution, and the first age of political party has indisputable affinities with liberal, secular modernity, we have learned to appreciate better the swirling intellectual and political currents of these decades and to acknowledge the continuing prominence of principles and agendas, especially those we might label as “religious,” that were prematurely discounted by earlier commentators. This realization owes much to the published work of such careful historians as Mark Goldie, William Bulman, and Justin Champion, and it can be traced methodologically to an academic commitment to engaging with ideas in context, reading texts in the round, and avoiding oversimplification. Such a granular approach refuses to shoe-horn various nuanced, evolving, and partisan arguments into the tidy categories necessary for a whiggish teleology of the rise of the modern bourgeois democracies and the secular rights-based principles that sustain them.

In this vein, Alex W. Barber, one of the late professor Champion’s students, now seeks “to trace the complex relationship between the press and the Church and state, and from the Williamite revolutionary moment to the prosecution of Henry Sacheverell in 1710” (p. 278). Barber uses an impressive number of publications, sermons, and court cases and a significant body of archival manuscript sources, drawn from across the two decades of the 1690s and 1700s but clustered around 1698, 1704, and 1710, to advance his case for thinking about how contemporaries discussed free speech, “not how modern historians think they should have” (p. xii). Instead of being guided by “modern liberal ideas,” Barber offers his
chosen texts “as complex discussions of how the press might be configured to establish and maintain civil and political stability and to allow individuals to locate religious truth, not as simply for the press or against censorship” (p. 14). This hefty book discusses well-known individuals, such as Henry Sacheverell, Matthew Tindal, John Toland, and Francis Atterbury, but takes account of some of their less familiar work. Barber’s subtitle comes from Sacheverell’s sermon of that name which appeared alongside the notorious In Peril amongst False Brethren in 1709. These two hugely popular sermons, along with Sacheverell’s subsequent trial, provide the lens through which Barber brings the central issue into focus: in the eyes of High Churchmen, an uncontrolled press had given vent to such blasphemy, heresy, error, and abuse that the state, church, and nation were in peril. Yet for their Whig, Low Church, Dissenting or freethinking opponents, it was the outspoken High Church preachers and pamphleteers who needed to be silenced through prosecution or censorship. The cacophony of arguments is amplified from the writings and tribulations of more obscure figures—among them William Stephens, Francis Higgins, John Tutchin, Richard West, and Francis Gregory—industriously resurrected by Barber. Readers are thrown into the maelstrom of Augustan controversy and borne along on a stream of examples and summaries. The intention is to show that press freedom was not an abstract principle from which all else flowed and which led directly to the First Amendment but a topic of debate that was pulled in different directions by concerns about national morality, the dangers of false Christian doctrine, the position of the Church of England, and the legacy of the Revolution of 1688-89. Knitting this all together is the claim that while the lapse of the Printing Act ended prepublication censorship in 1695, thereafter freedom of the press was restrained by harassment and controls, such as threatened or incomplete prosecutions.

After introductory discussion of the liberal shibboleth of press freedom and its canonical authors, John Milton, Locke, and Charles Blount, the book falls into two halves. Chapters 1 through 4 focus on the 1690s. The central theme is the Williamite regime’s campaign against immorality and the challenges it faced. These arose from the Trinitarian controversy, Toland’s Christianity not Mysterious (1696), demands for the recall of convocation, and debates between Tindal and his adversaries. The second half of the book is devoted to the first decade of the eighteenth century: two chapters cover Augustan discussions of how to curb the licentious press, perhaps through outlawing anonymity, and the crystallization of the High Church position through the arguments of Atterbury and Sacheverell. All this is fleshed out with fascinating material from a host of witnesses, including Robert Harley, Daniel Defoe, William Wake, Archbishop Tenison, and Bishop Hoadly. Chapters 7 and 8 provide a substantial account of how “the church in danger” became more than just a slogan. As a rallying call for the High Church, this phrase became the vital evidence deployed by the Whigs to argue that the churchmen were undermining the revolution settlement and should be silenced. To simplify, no party was prepared to allow untrammeled freedom of expression.

The virtues of Barber’s approach are legion. These accounts of sermons, pamphlets, and controversies are rooted in their contemporary moments. The author is not shy about pointing out inconsistencies, differences between public and private opinions, still evolving positions, and shared ground. He is alert to the dynamic aspect of controversies and wary of anachronism. He helps the reader understand how partisan positions emerged fitfully from debate. And the lesson appears to be that the Glorious Revolution was at the heart of the debate. Revolution principles of toleration and resistance provoked the emerging High Church obsessions with non-resistance, discipline, and the danger to the Church of England from freethinking, Dissent, and impiety. Adversaries on all sides were arguing over the revolution
and leveling accusations of sedition and license against their opponents. This was what fueled attempts to restrain press freedom and motivated arguments against liberty of the press. Paradoxically, then, this book turns out to be less about press freedom as it is usually conceived than about the fluid and multidimensional world of political and religious debate in these decades. There are several themes wrestling to come to the fore: anticlericalism, Deism, theology, and the public sphere, among others. High Church thinking, for example, is treated with a refreshing and welcome seriousness. Barber gives proper recognition to the pastoral and theological motives of clergymen who were genuinely concerned about the eternal salvation of their flocks. Although one might occasionally cavil about formulations, such as the soteriological opposition of sincerity and true doctrine, Barber helpfully points readers to overlooked texts and emphases and goes some way to redress the condescension of modern secular historians toward these churchmen. Throughout the book, Barber often justifiably complains that historians have overlooked or misunderstood his sources. He is in the business, after all, of recovering contemporary discussions in all their messy reality.

There is, however, a downside to being quite so close to one’s material. Readers will occasionally find this book difficult to follow or digest. Although the author takes care to signpost the content of the next section or chapter, at times those without sufficient prior knowledge of the issues, actors, and chronology will find themselves in some dense thickets. The author’s prose could be more precise at times. It is a pity if presentational defects were to obscure the valuable summaries of many scores of tracts and debates. A larger question is whether the case studies that make up this book can be effectively tied down to the central thesis. It may be misguided to ask if a case of this sort can ever be proved. Although Barber is critical of historians, such as Mark Knights, who have argued that liberty of the press was increas-ingly seen as the source and safeguard of all liberties and that press restraint was exercised through the market, taxation, and refutation, rather than censorship, his own discussion is so wide ranging that at times it seems to illustrate what was being argued over and why rather than how those arguments were to be curtailed. Where the two can be brought together successfully, as they are in his account of the Sacheverell trial, then the author’s approach is more than vindicated. Standing back from the mass of rich detail presented in this enthralling book, and with due regard to the author’s reluctance to provide a foundational route-map to modernity, one conclusion to be drawn is that no-one’s demands for either liberty or restraint of expression should go unexamined or unchallenged.
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