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Notes on Political Poems, c. 1640

Charles L. Hamilton

The Civil wars in England and Scotland during the seventeenth century produced a wealth of popular literature. Some of it has permanent literary merit, but a large share of the popular creations, especially of the poetry, was little more than bad doggerel. Even so, one little-known and two unpublished poems such as the following are important as a guide to public opinion.

From the period of the Bishops’ Wars (1638-40) the Scottish Covenanters repeatedly urged the English to abolish episcopacy and to enter a religious union with them. The following poem, written very likely on the eve of the meeting of the Long Parliament, exemplifies the Scottish feeling very clearly:

Oyes, Oyes do I Cry
The Bishops’ Bridles Will ye Buy?
Since Bishops first began to ride,
In state so near the crown
They have been aye puffed up with pride
And ride with great renown.
But God has pulled these prelates down
In spite of Spain and Pope,
So shall there next eclipse be soon?
In England seen I hope.

But now brave England be thou bent
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To banish all that band,
And make your Lambeth Laud repent
That never did yet good.
But shamefully hath sought the blood
Of sakeless saints of God.
Relieve your Lincoln\(^4\) better loved
And set him safe abroad.

There is no doubt that most of the Covenanting leaders were interested in the extirpation of bishops, ‘root and branch,’ in England because of their belief that the prelates were the primary cause of Scotland’s conflict with Charles I. Until Laud and his colleagues—the wicked councillors who surrounded their sweet prince—were removed and episcopacy abolished, the Scots leaders argued that future bishops’ wars would occur, thereby undermining the Convenanters’ achievements in Scotland.\(^5\) Some of the Scots, however, had grander dreams. To them the destruction of bishops in England and Ireland was only the beginning of a crusade which would carry them to the Continent to oppose the forces of the Triple Tyrant in Rome.\(^6\) The following poem describes Scotland and England joining to free the Irish from papal enthrallment and then marching to the aid of the Continental Protestants, especially avenging the evil done to the daughter of King James VI and I, Elizabeth, the ‘Winter Queen.’

Britain and Ireland’s Last Adieu
To Rome, and Babel’s Cursed Crew\(^7\)

Since Jock and Jack by happy chance/ are joined in amity:
You Popish Monsieurs march to France/ you Dons to Castalee.
Let Romish frogs return to Rome/ and mean them to the Pope:
If here they haunt, expect a doom/ no better than a rope.

* * * *

Jack use thy time and busy be/ to chase these frogs away,
And with brave Jock keep company/ who will thee lend a day
At Lyne he’ll on thy service stay/ while thy well-settled be:
And for Shane’s sake along the way/ to Dublin march with thee.

* * * *

And when brave Jock returns from Lyne
And Shane from Rome set-free,
Jock will with Jack march to the Rhine
The Palsgrave's bounds to see.  
There to avenge the woes and wrongs  
Of our Eliza fair,  
Whose princely race bound down so long  
Is by the Spaniard there.  

* * * * *  
The Lord who hath this work begun.  
Make it perfected be:  
And when the troublous times are done  
End Zion's Misery.  
Amen quoth he, who prays these three  
By God conjoined in unity,  
May still in one Religion  
Fear God, under one tripled Crown:  
That Dagon here as he hath been  
May near God's ark no more be seen.  

The events of the Long Parliament gave political poets a vast amount of subject matter. In the following excerpt, taken from a MS. volume entitled Pasquinades, collected by Sir James Balfour of Denmilne, the King is told how he could gain popularity.  

Change places Charles, put thou on Pym's grey gown,  
While in the lower house he wears a crown,  
Let him be King a while, and be thou Pym  
Then we'll adore thee as we do him.  

The King had no intention of accepting Pym's demands, however, and his attitude, conflicting with that of the opposition in Parliament, brought on the Civil War. Perhaps this was inevitable, for in varying degrees, the Royalists, Parliament and the Scots, who entered the war in 1643 as allies of the Lords and Commons, all believed that they were fighting for a Holy Cause which could allow no compromise.

3For a statement of the Covenanters' intentions, see a pamphlet published by the Scots immediately preceding their invasion of England in the Second Bishops' War. This is printed in the Calendar of State Papers Domestic 1640-41, pp. 161ff.
5Doubtful reading.
6John Williams, Bishop of Lincoln and later Archbishop of York, was imprisoned in the Tower in 1637. An opponent of Laud, Williams was popular with those who objected to the religious policy of Charles I. Williams was released in November, 1640, and he played an important role in the House of Lords during the first year of the
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Long Parliament. Toward the end of 1641 he protested against the anti-episcopal behavior of the London mob. This lost him his standing with the popular party and resulted in his being returned to the Tower until May, 1642. For criticism of him in a ballad, see "The Bishops' Last Good-Night," Cavalier and Puritan, ed. by Hyder E. Rollins (New York, 1923), pp. 134-35.

For indications of this attitude, see [Alexander Henderson] Our Commissioners' Desires Concerning Unity in Religion . . . as a Special Means for Preserving of Peace in His Majesty's Dominions (London, 1641).

See The Correspondence of de Montereul and the Brothers de Belliere . . . ed. by J. G. Fotheringham (Edinburgh, 1898), I, xiv.

A printed version of this poem appears in Denmilne Papers, XII, no. 74, National Library of Scotland.

Dagon: originally the Philistine fish-god, hence Roman Catholics.

The volume is contained in the Denmilne Collection in the National Library of Scotland. The poem is dated November, 1642.