

Summer 1971

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Citation Details

Conroy, Graham P. "George Berkeley and the Jacobite Heresy: Some Comments on Irish Augustan Politics." *Albion*, volume 3, number 2 (1971): 82-91.

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George Berkeley and the Jacobite Heresy: Some Comments on Irish Augustan Politics

Graham P. Conroy

“In 1727 Swift met Bolingbroke, Pope, and Arbuthnot for the last time; that autumn he went back to Ireland for good, and the Augustan circle was dispersed. The next summer Pope took a riding tour on an elderly pony that rolled Lord Cobham’s lawns at Stowe; only on his journey did he discover that this veteran had been brave Derwentwater’s charger in the ’15.”

So says Keith Grahame Feiling with great wistfulness of the passing of the turbulent times surrounding the abortive Second Stuart Restoration and its impact on English and Irish social and political life in the opening page of his *The Second Tory Party, 1714-1832*.

Prior to this time the Irish philosopher and patriot George Berkeley, author of the celebrated *Treatise on the Principles of Human Nature* and the ingenious *Querist* was a member of that same circle and after the breaking of the circle charges of Jacobitism that had been levelled at the members of this brilliant and select group trotted behind his footsteps as he moved through the remaining decades of his life. The following pages are an attempt to explain Berkeley’s connections with the Augustan Circle and to mitigate the criticisms brought against him by those opposed to the views of some of that group.

Ireland with her tragic history of partition, of English subjugation, conquest and reconquest was continually, ripe for the intervention of outside forces to help regain her ancient powers and prerogatives whether it lay in a Stuart Restoration or in the actual intervention of France. The memory of Cromwell, the Lord Protector, was still fiery in the memories of the Gaelic lords and the Irish Catholic bishops and the memories of Tyrone and Tyrconnel still grew green at the time of the rising of 1715. Not only were the Roman Catholics anxious for the restoration of a Stuart king who could assert his Prerogative over Ireland and restore the attainted lands and titles of the Williamite Settlement but even the Anglo-Irish ascendancy originally more English than Irish were becoming more Irish than English as a result the use of Poyning’s Law which referred all acts of the Irish Parliament back to Whitehall for final ratification and was a continual thorn in the Irish side. In com-

merce Ireland was treated as a subjugated nation, the wool trade not being allowable, nor was Ireland permitted to pursue her own trade overseas. There were two ways the Anglo-Irish could go: one was rebellion, the other was to try to effect some changes in the decisions of the English Parliament to improve Irish fortunes at home.

After the flight of James II the last Stuart king to rule the three kingdoms, the face of rising cries of anti-Popery and indignation at the alleged Popish Plot, Parliament brought over William Prince of Orange, together with his wife Mary, daughter of King James. Britain was now faced with the possibility of two kings, one legal and *de jure* and one *de facto* placed on the throne by the aftermath the Glorious Revolution of 1688. James with the help of the Sun King, Louis XIV, attempted to regain his lost kingdoms.

This attempt at a second Stuart restoration was foredoomed to failure, however, by James' breaking with the Church Established and the Tory party in England and by his attempts to secure general toleration by his royal Prerogative alone and with the possible but uncertain support of the Protestant Dissenters. The Anglican minority in Ireland also began to waver in their loyalty. The climax was reached in the issuance by James of his Declarations of Indulgence. The first was extended to Ireland in 1687, the second in 1688. The Second Declaration was ordered read in every pulpit within the entire realm. When six bishops together with Archbishop Sancroft refused to do so on the grounds that the king had no right to suspend religious law he had them sent to the Tower, accused of seditious libel. Then some months later a son was born to James depriving the Anglicans of their seemingly last strong argument for obedience, the belief that James would be without issue and that the succession would pass to Mary and William of Orange. Frustrated in this hope members of both parties, Tories and Whigs alike, albeit the Tories somewhat reluctantly, brought over the Prince to save their land from Catholic dominion. As if to further underscore England's determination the Sancroft Seven were let go. Thus arrived in England on November 5, 1688, the 'Whig deliverer' (to the Whig majority), William of Orange; but to the majority of Irishmen James was the lawful king and the heir after him his infant son James Edward.

James Stuart was able to find no one in England to fight for him and only a few thousand Highlanders in Scotland. His only hope after the Scottish Jacobites lost out at Killecrankie in June of 1689 was Roman Catholic Ireland. The year before, troops under Tyrconnell were in the field and were attempting to secure Ireland for the *de jure* sovereign. James was still the only king, but some of the Irish leaders such as Chief Justice Keating favored making terms with William. It was too late to act, though, as Tyrconnell was already securing most of the garrisons with the exception of Derry and Eniskillen, exceptions which were to prove disastrous to the Stuart cause. The famous story of the apprentice boys shutting the gates of Derry against the troops of the Earl of Antrim is, of course, well known and marks one of the most important holidays still celebrated by Ulster Orangeman.

Acting on February 13, 1689, William and Mary accepted the crown of

England given by a vote of Parliament and were crowned king and queen for life. Scotland opted for William III and so only Ireland offered a refuge to James. In the following month he landed with a French escort at Kinsale, later proceeding to Dublin and in May of the same year set up the so-called 'Patriot Parliament' made up from the assembly of the Irish Estates. The Protestant garrisons in the North held out and William and his Dutch generals such as Schomberg met the enemy and the Battle of the Boyne on July 1, 1690, sealed the fate of the First Jacobite rising in Ireland. After the Boyne it was all over although action still went on, but with overwhelming English power and no real immediate troop help from France there was no hope of victory. John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, not wanting to be robbed of the glory of victories by Dutch generals seized the port cities of Cork and Kinsale. Too late the intrepid Marshal St. Rutts put honesty in the Sun King's pledge to help the Irish by raising 15,000 men and bringing supplies from France in 1691 only to be killed and his troops decimated at Aughrim beyond Ballinasloe. Tyrconnell having died in August, 1691, the command of all remaining Irish troops passed over to Patrick Sarsfield, created the Earl of Lucan by James. After holding out valiantly Sarsfield was finally besieged in Limerick for a month after which surrendered and the Irish Wars ended with the Treaty of Limerick on October 3, 1691.

There is no doubt that the Irish saw the war of 1689-91 as a real rebellion and that the English Parliament had risen up against the rightful sovereign as had Cromwell against Charles I and though there was no regicide in this case, the *de jure* king was denied his sovereignty and forced to live out his remaining days under the patronage of Louis in France at his court-in-exile of St. Germaine. The strangeness in this situation was to be seen in a King *de jure* who till but a short time before had been King *de facto* in all three realms, arrayed in warfare against a king made ruler *de facto* by the English and Scottish parliaments. According, however, to the official constitutional position invoked since Henry Tudor claimed Ireland as a part of his crown, the latter kingdom was considered annexed to whoever chanced to be *de facto* King of England. This theory abhorred by the Irish was used to base the claims of Cromwell and then of William III and the English Parliament to rule Ireland. William realized the Irish position and was probably willing to give Ireland most of her former rights after her submission, but was no doubt prevented from doing this by the English Parliament which was both Protestant and anti-Irish and had stripped William of his use of Royal Prerogative thus in effect reducing the monarchy to a constitutional limit. Although the myth of the divine right of kings, so eloquently proclaimed by an earlier King James, was seemingly preserved in 1689, it was all too apparent that the sovereignty of Parliament had triumphed. To William, too, it was all too apparent as he had to listen to the Earl of Wharton remind him more than once: "We have made you King." In this simple statement the Whig interpretation triumphed and they found their philosophy in the *Two Treatises of Government* of John Locke (written in 1681 but published in 1689), for Locke held that sovereignty belonged to the people and that monarchy

was nothing more than a trustee of those rights. If that trustee abused those rights and their stewardship, then rebellion was not only justified but became a duty. Locke himself had been very chary about that duty to revolt and when he employed it backed the wrong horse being drawn into the intrigues of Lord Shaftesburg to install the Duke of Monmouth as sovereign and was forced to flee to Holland to live for several years as an exile under an assumed name.

During the decade following the Irish Wars William led England into a period of relative prosperity, although it later appeared that English, as well as Scottish and Irish aspirations had been sacrificed to William's programs against the French and that English prosperity had actually been sacrificed for the Dutch Barrier (at least this was Viscount Bolingbroke's view) and a period of military triumph although again these were more Dutch concerns than English. But even with the successes of *de facto* government Jacobite agents plied between St. Germaine and Whitehall. In 1692 and 1693 Jacobites in London became more insolent. They filled the coffee-houses cocked their hats in the Queen's face, and even fastened notices to the gates of Whitehall:

Molly, do not cry
Daddy will be here presently¹

Then the unexpected happened rapidly, Queen Mary died of the pox in 1694 leaving William sole ruler, but William was to follow eight years later when his horse, Sorrel, stumbled over a mole hill bringing about his death. The mole hill rapidly became a political mountain by the accession to the throne of the Princess Anne in 1702 and with the reign of this last Stuart monarch of England the spectre of civil war once more cast its gloom over the realm. The important question that now divided parties and factions was "Would the Stuart line rule in continuation or would the sovereignty pass to the House of Hanover if the new Queen died without an heir which seemed most probably so?" This divided the High-Church Tories into Jacobite and Hanoverian Tories and provided a strong test for the Whig lords.

In 1688, the year of the Glorious Revolution, George Berkeley who was to become Ireland's most celebrated philosopher, a great patriot, and a leader of literature and culture, and, in the words of contemporary critics both of his time and ours, one of the greatest stylists of the Augustans was three years of age having been born at Thomastown near Kilkenny of Anglo-Irish parents and was a relative of Lord Berkeley of Stratton. In 1702, the year of William's death, the young Berkeley two years at Trinity College Dublin was elected a Scholar and in 1705 he helped form the Metaphysical Society of T.C.D. which exists to the present day. In 1707 he became a college tutor where one of his students was Samuel Molyneux, son of the celebrated author of the work *The Case of Ireland* and a correspondent of John Locke whose philosophy was the principal study in the Irish University's philosophical faculty. 1709 saw the publication of Berkeley's first philosophical work *The New Theory of Vision* which brought him into controversy with William King

Archbishop of Dublin, who had already expressed some indignation over the circumstances surrounding Berkeley's ordination.

Although the *Essay* didn't bring the type of response he hoped it would — Leibniz among others criticized it irresponsibly without attempting to understand its meaning — he was a famous thinker respected by many other famous personages as a result of the appearance of his *Treatise on the Principles of Human Knowledge* in 1710. Not completely satisfied himself by the publication of the *Principles* he essayed to carry his doctrines further in a set of three dialogues whose setting was the forecourt of Trinity College. He departed for London in 1713 to see to the publication of this work *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*. Through the good offices of his new friend Jonathan Swift, whom he had met in Dublin, he was introduced over the period of a few years to the principal English and Irish Augustan writers, men such as the pamphleteer and satirist Jonathan Arbuthnot, a Scot who was physician to Queen Anne; to the poets Pope and Parnell and John Gay, author of the *Beggars' Opera*; to the playwrights and journalists Addison and Steele, the authors of the celebrated *Spectators* and *Guardian* papers; to politicians such as Robert Harley, later Lord Oxford, and Henry St. John, later created Viscount Bolingbroke, author of the famous *Patriot King* and a critic of Berkeley's later dialogue *Alciphron*. All in all quite a mixture of Anglicans, Dissenters and Papists; Whigs and Tories; clerics and council members; gentry, lords and commoners. Some of them pledged themselves to the Protestant Succession of the House of Hanover; some became Jacobite sympathizers or active Jacobites. All remained friends of George Berkeley.

As a cleric and as subsequent Dean of Derry he was a friend of Swift. Dean of St. Patrick's in Dublin, and of Francis Atterbury, most famous of Jacobite Bishops, who planned a cabal to bring over the Pretender and was impeached and disgraced in 1723. He weathered the attacks of Whig Bishop Hoadly of Bangorian Controversy fame against his *Alciphron* and its religious doctrines and lasted through the earlier Whig impeachment of the preacher Sacheverell in 1710, an overblown tempest which was to be the rock that brought down the Whig government.

During his student days he had been a friend of Molyneux, of Edward Syngé, later Bishop of Elphin, author of *The Case of Toleration*, of Samuel Madden, also known as Premiums Madden for his contribution of prize money for the new developments in Irish agriculture and industry, one of the main movers of the Royal Dublin Society and author of *Reflections* and an advocate of a Union with England like that of Scotland, of Thomas Prior, founder of the Royal Dublin Society and publisher of *A List of Absentees of Ireland and the Yearly Value of Their Estates and Incomes Spent Abroad*. Together with Berkeley as he expressed his national feelings in the *Querist* and in his notes for a national bank and his criticisms against the coinage of Wood's sixpence they made up a group of Irish patriots, although a group of much softer spoken patriots for Irish rights than Jonathan Swift or John Molesworth.

All in all George Berkeley moved in interesting social circles.

If, as one recent purveyor of the 18th Century Commonwealthman has said, this was

A group of reformers most of whom would have shrunk from any connection with radical ideas — Madden, Prior and Berkeley, classmates at school and at college and friends throughout their careers — admonished their fellow countrymen about their faults and tried to persuade and encourage them to do all that was possible to remedy Ireland's troubles. Though they refrained from all but the mildest criticism of English policies, they will be found to share many of the reactions of the more violent Molesworth and Swift.²

Then why was it that Berkeley was considered to a dangerous Jacobite from around 1710 on until at least 1716 a full year after the abortive rising of the Fifteen?

The answer I think can be found in Berkeley's authorship of three sermons on passive obedience delivered by him in the chapel of Trinity College Dublin and in his loyalty to his friends, many with avowed or about to be avowed Jacobite sympathies.

One of the principal sets of documents that could be used in Berkeley's defense are his letters to his friend, Sir John Percival, to whom his *Essay on the Theory of Vision* was dedicated. Other line of defense lie in a closer reading of his printed sermons on passive obedience, collected together and printed in 1712, in his *Advice to Tories Who Have Taken the Oaths* written before the Fifteen and in his *Two Letters on the Occasion of the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745* written to the Roman Catholics residing in his Church of Ireland diocese of Cloyne which was followed by the raising of two troop of horse to repel Bonnie Prince Charlie paid by from his own pocket.

The letters between Percival and Berkeley are extremely interesting as they give a picture of times leading up to the attempt to bring in the Pretender James Edward in 1715 and teem with reports of all the important people and intrigues sent from Berkeley with his access to the literary Augustan political writers in London to Percival in Dublin where the air crackles with a mixture of hope, fear and confusion. In addition to the facts and gossip out of court and the coffee-houses, Berkeley discusses the philosophical issues involved in the conflicting loyalties to monarchy, particularly the crucial questions concerning *de facto* and *de jure* sovereignty. It is unfortunate it seems to me that few historians have availed themselves of any of this material to cast new light on the Jacobite Question. I can, of course, give no more than a perfunctory notice due to the limits of this paper. It would also be most salutary to compare this correspondence with that between Swift and Berkeley, inasmuch as Swift was privy to more intimate circles of Tory policy discussions, but alas, such correspondence does not exist although it must have previously.

The first of the questions discussed in the Berkeley-Percival letters is a discussion of the *de jure*, *de facto* distinction as it turns around a book by one William Higden, titled *A View of the English Constitution*, etc. (1709). Berkeley, still in Dublin, writes on October 21, 1709.

But to return to our author, two things there are that I scruple in his book: the first, is his retaining the distinction of kings *de jure* and kings *de facto* without giving any mark whereby we shall know the one from the other. I would ask him for example, how upon his principles it is possible to distinguish between the posterity of the usurper Cromwell (in case they had obtained and continued on the throne) and the posterity of the Conqueror, which is but a more specious name for an Usurper. In the first chapters he proves the legislative authority of the king for the time being and his two Houses of Parliament, to be acknowledged both by the common and statute laws; and at the latter end of the sixth chapter he expressly says the right of the crown is under the direction of the legislative authority, i.e., of the king *de facto* and his Parliament. Whence it plainly follows that every king *de facto* is a king *de jure*, and so the distinction becomes useless. The second thing I cannot approve of in Mr. Higden is, that he seems to be against all resistance whatsoever to the king *de facto* as is evident from chapter seven. Now by this it appears his principles do not favour the late Revolution, though indeed he is now for submission to the government established.³

This latter point shows the concern over conflicting loyalties felt by Non-Jacobite High-Church Tories like Berkeley (he insists to Percival that he is “a Hanoverian Tory”)⁴ and lends perhaps mistakenly to imputation of Jacobite leanings. How could (says A. A. Luce) they accept the Revolution that was passed without condoning and promoting the Jacobite rebellion, the shadow of which already lay across the land? How could they teach obedience without approving tyranny?⁵

A little further on in the same letter Berkeley says he can think of nothing “more becoming a gentleman and man of sense” than Percival’s taking to know the measure of his obedience “and the bounds of their power who rule.” He then recommends for his reading Plato’s *Crito* and the second part of Locke’s *Treatise on Government* to know the measure of his obedience owed. It was this latter work according to Bishop Stock’s *Memoir* of Berkeley that turned his attention to the doctrine of passive obedience.

The *de facto* issue and the doctrine of passive obedience are most certainly bound together. It was general Whig policy unfortunately in gaining their ends to accuse all High Tories of Jacobitism and to claim that all who held the passive obedience doctrine were Jacobites. Certainly the doctrine was held by avowed Jacobites such as Arbuthnot who sets it out in his *History of John Bull* in the second part, which is praised by Berkeley, and was published in

1712, the same year as Berkeley's *Passive Obedience*. Publication in the same year may be not entirely coincidental although there is no proof of this. The doctrine was also preached by Sacheverell and Whigs angered at the results of their impeachment of the former may have decided to strike at Berkeley and obstruct his preferments. Then, too, Berkeley was not too clear about making his public sentiments known as he evidenced in his drinking of healths. From Trinity on March 1, 1709/10 he writes to Percival that

"All friends here are well. The other night Archdeacon Percival, Dan Dering and myself were drinking your and Dr. Sacheverell's health at your brother's."⁶

And writing again from Trinity he writes on September 6, 1710:

"This puts me in mind to tell you a pleasant accident that befell me ten days since. I was just come into the coffee-house when a drunken gentleman I had never seen comes up to me and asks me if I would pledge him in Dr. Sacheverell's health . . . and when I had done he fell on his knees and prayed for the Dr. and the Church."⁷

He says he also understands that several others were made to drink the Dr.'s health and that one of these was a Parliament man. The incident was reported to Parliament the next day and complained of as a breach of privilege.

"I am told [he continues] this involuntary act of mine is like to gain me the reputation of being a great admirer of Dr. Sacheverell's, which is a character I am not at all fond of. I like indeed very well the events which his preaching may have brought about; for (if I may judge of such things) it seems to me the Government had been too long in the hands of a party.

Two months later the *Passive Obedience* issue comes up again. Writing from Co. Meath, Berkeley tells of meeting a country curate who came to complain to Trinity's provost of being abused by a student and some Whig-parishoners for preaching at the time of the Divine Service, on *Passive Obedience*.⁸ The important thing to remember is that passive obedience was a Tory doctrine, disliked by the Whigs. A doctrine of restricted allegiance, it taught that a man can consider himself loyal to a government he dislikes, provided he does not oppose it, and that he can with consistency and loyalty disobey an order if he accept the legal penalty for non-complying. A self-avowed Hanoverian, Berkeley "skated lightly over the question of the limits of loyalty and of the fine line between passive obedience and disobedience."⁹ Although espousing the Protestant Succession it is by no means entirely certain that Berkeley did not have strong Jacobite leanings prior to the taking of the throne by George I. At the very least Berkeley's own statements leave the issue somewhat clouded. His stand on passive obedience was used to block his advancement when the Whigs came back into their long power in 1714 and in 1716 he was denied even a modest living in Dublin although it had been recommended by the

Prince of Wales (George II) through the intercession of the Prince's Secretary Berkeley's old friend and student Samuel Molyneux. The charge was brought up again in 1732 to block him from the rich Deanery of Down. When Percival learned of this he told it in high places that after the accession of George I his friend Berkeley had published a pamphlet (1715) *Advice to Tories who have taken the Oaths* wherein he told them "to acquiesce in the present government, and be dutiful subjects" and not to violate the sanctity of the oaths they have taken. Berkeley in no way seems sympathetic here to a return to the Stuart Monarchy. This note carried through into the letters he writes his Gascon friend Gervais from Cloyne when he raises munitions and horses to protect his poor Protestants of Cloyne (November 24, 1745) against the third unsuccessful Jacobite rising, the Forty-five which beginning in Scotland under Bonnie Prince Charlie was to get as far as Derby only to die in Collondon.¹⁰ In the same letter he praises his old friend, now recently dead, Jonathan Swift and firmly asserts that being a Tory does not make one a Jacobite and that wit is above party. Almost as an epitaph to Swift (and almost as a living memorial to himself) he states:

"The poor dead Dean, though no idolator of the Whigs, was no more Jacobite than Dr. Baldwin.* And had he ever been a Papist, what then? Wit is of no party."¹¹

Berkeley the Tory was no Jacobite. He was an Irishman working for all Ireland, Whig and Tory, Anglican and Catholic alike and he shows this eloquently in his *Two Letters on the Occasion of the Jacobite Rebellion 1745* as calls for all Catholics to stand against the "Young" Pretender and work for a united and prosperous nation. His searching questioning of obedience was the problem of a dedicated philosopher arguing and agonizing a question of great ethical import. It was not his doing that witless Whigs had used his words to malign his deeds. Had he not been friend to Addison and Steele as well as to Swift? Must we not believe that those entries in his *Philosophical Commentaries* written in his student days at Trinity that begin with the words, "We Irishmen believe that," "We Irishmen do not think that" referred to all Irishmen bound together by common sense beliefs in a common Irish soil.¹² Must we not believe that the first fruits of Berkeley's thinkings as philosopher and man of action as well as those of his old age were dedicated to the spirit of a people and their progress placed above ultimately questions of power, party, honors, or preferment. If the thought fits Swift, it fits Berkeley even more neatly. "Wit is of no party."

* an arch Whig and a provost of Trinity College Dublin

N O T E S

¹H. North to Sancroft, 2 April 1693, Tanner MSS 25, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

²Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 137.

³Berkeley, George, *The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London: Thos. Nelson & Sons, 1948-52), [hereafter cited as *Works*], Vol. VIII, Letter no. 3.

⁴*Works*, Vol. VIII, Introduction, p. 2.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Works*, Vol. VIII, Letter no. 8.

⁷*Ibid.*, Letter no. 12.

⁸*Ibid.*, Letter no. 15.

⁹*Works*, Vol. IX, comments on Letter no. 15.

¹⁰*Works*, Vol. VIII, Letter no. 225.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Works*, Vol. I, Philosophical Commentaries nos. 393, 394.