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“Ill-informed passions,” “candor and evenness” and “superficial writers”: Gilbert Burnet and the “Other” Historians of the English Reformation

Gilbert Burnet is one of the most significant diarists and chroniclers of the late seventeenth century. As helpful architect of the religious element of William and Mary’s revolution, Bishop of Salisbury, and brother Latitudinarian with the many other bishops appointed during the Revolutionary Settlement, Burnet both reflects and shaped one strain of Anglicanism in the 1690s. Historians are grateful for his ubiquitous publishing, and his *History of My Own Time* remains a mine for juicy observations and the inside scoop on court politics and personalities.

Burnet is less read today for his 3-volume *History of the Reformation of the Church in England* than for his sermons and tracts. However, recently, Alexandra Walsham, John Spurr, Andrew Starkie, Felicity Heal and many others have taken up the study of the early modern histories of the Reformation, including Burnet’s best-seller in the process.¹ They have primarily focused on Burnet’s providentialism and his Erastianism, the latter promoting such a specific view of what the church should be like that his *History* was immediately deeply controversial. Because Burnet was able to attempt to implement his priorities on the C of E after the Restoration, these volumes are a rich source for seeing what he thought was core to Christianity, Protestantism and the church’s work in Scotland and England.

It is also a good representation of the Latitudinarian ideals regarding rationality and scholarship and is one of the many works we can look to for how the profession of the historian was evolving and becoming more self-conscious. Make no mistake, however: Burnet was in no way neutral, in the way modern historians have sometimes imagined a scholar should be. Still, Protestant historians, he argued, have up till his writing “employed their best pens rather to justify what they did, than to deliver how it was done.”² And he was deeply intentional about his use of sources, as he saw the collecting and publishing of original documents as integral to finding out and proving what “really” happened—allowing the reader to judge for themselves, as he so often said. Tony Claydon has argued that Burnet was more apocalyptic than we usually see Latitudinarians as being,³ but this primarily comes from Claydon’s looking at Burnet’s sermons rather than analyzing the *History*, which he wrote in the middle of the Popish Plot and so could have made much more apocalyptic. I will argue elsewhere that he didn’t in fact do this, and that if he was deeply providentialist, he does a good job of muting it in the first two volumes of his *History*.⁴

Burnet wrote that work, he says, in order to respond to what he sees as bad history. Both bad Protestant history and bad Catholic history, which he usually evaluates based on how they treat their evidence. And so, he is painfully explicit in some places about his sources, and glibly ignores them in others. I argue that he used his arguments with other scholars to promote a

¹ Alexandra Walsham: “History, Memory and the English Reformation” *The Historical Journal*, 55, 4 (2012), Cambridge University Press; “A special kindness for dead bishops”: John Spurr, “The Church, History, and Testimony in Seventeenth-Century Protestantism” *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 1-2 (March 2005), pp. 313-335; Felicity Heal, “Appropriating History: Catholic and Protestant Polemics and the National Past” *Huntington library quarterly*, vol.68, nos.1 & 2, 109 pp. 109–132; Andrew Starkie, “Contested Histories of the English Church: Gilbert Burnet and Jeremy Collier” *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 1-2 (March 2005), pp. 335-35.

²Gilbert Burnet, *The History of the Reformation of the Church of England*, 3 vols. in 6 (Oxford, 1829 [orig. 1679–1715]), 1:vi.

³ Tony Claydon, “Latitudinarianism and Apocalyptic History in the Worldview of Gilbert Burnet, 1643-1715” *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Sep., 2008), pp. 577-597

⁴ This paper is the beginning of a larger project looking at Burnet as a historian who felt he was called by God to reform his church. Written before he rose to the level he would attain when sponsored by William and Mary, his *History of the Reformation* shows his attempt at laying out his vision for the church in a way that was intended to appeal to a large audience, navigating a course that pulled from both providentialist Protestantism and an attempt at a non-religious, *real politic* explanation for the changes in the Church of England in the sixteenth century.

specific way of doing history, and that he appropriated those same polemical historians/sources, including, most dramatically, Catholic ones, in order to make his claim for a unified, simplified Church of England.

“Faint Excuses and Mistaken Accounts”

Burnet’s primary engagement with other historians, both those he agrees with and those he doesn’t, involve discussion of their use of original documents. It isn’t surprising that an early member of the Royal Society or someone who had a thirty-year friendship with Robert Boyle would be so committed to the appearance of a scientific method in source-gathering.⁵ His work was doubled in length through his publishing a Collection of Documents at the end of each volume of his history. Burnet wasn’t the first historian to do this, by any means, but he may have been capitalizing on the popularity of the John Rushworth’s collections of documents from the Civil Wars, which Samuel Pepys, among others, mentions as having been quite popular in the Restoration period.⁶ Throughout his work Burnet regularly refers the reader to the Collection, even as he quotes from or summarizes it in shorter length within the text itself. He also explicitly lays out situations in which he decides to include things that are not germane or explains why a particular document didn’t make it into the Collection. And he delights in correcting famous writers even when the argument isn’t specifically part the Reformation itself in order, he says “to let ingenious persons see that they ought not to take things on trust easily, no, not from the greatest authors.”⁷

In more than one situation his desire to seem even-handed can feel tortuous. Regarding the debate over the settlement early in Elizabeth’s reign he writes “Thus I have given the substance of their speeches, being all that I have seen of that side. I have seen none at all on the other [Catholic] side, though it is not probable but some were made in defence of the service, as well as these were against it...I do not put it in the collection because I have not that which the papists prepared in opposition to it.”⁸ While in many spots Burnet will have long sections of narrative without citing any sources, most of the time he gives heavy-handed sign posts to his readers, referring them to the Collection or explaining why something is not included in full text.

He criticizes the Tudor historians, specifically naming Holinshed, Speed and Stow for not looking into records themselves, and copying what others wrote, while he stops several times to affirm Lord Herbert for tracking down and laying his eyes on those same documents.⁹ In these cases, he wasn’t so much disagreeing with what they said as arguing for more evidence-based research and writing. He thinks that Protestant historians who are sloppy with their sources discredit their profession and the Reformation and are unable to respond to “the writers of the Romish party, whose relations are not a little strengthened by the faint excuses and mistaken accounts that most of the protestant historians have made.”¹⁰ For instance “many indecent stories were gathered [about abuses in the monasteries], especially by Bale who was a learned man, but did not write with that temper and discretion that became a divine.”¹¹ At the end of his first volume he ostentatiously includes a last-minute correction explaining that regarding Anne Bolyen’s trial “I too implicitly followed Dr. Heylyn; he seeming to write with ...such assurance as if he had seen the records concerning her; so that I took this upon trust from him. ...thus having

⁵John Drabble. "Thomas Fuller, Peter Heylyn and the English Reformation.. " *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme* 15, no. 2 (1979): 182

⁶T. E. S. Clarke and H. C. Foxcroft, *A Life of Gilbert Burnet* (Cambridge, 1907), xii

⁷Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:vii, 529

⁸Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 2:787.

⁹Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:vii, 173. He really tries hard to walk a fine line when assessing Henry VIII’s reign: “In the latter part of his reign there were many things that seem great severities, especially as they are represented by the writers of the Romish party, whose relations are not a little strengthened by the faint excuses and mistaken accounts that most of the protestant historians have made,” Burnet, 1:702.

¹⁰Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:702.

¹¹Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 2:189, 190.

no record to direct me, I too easily followed the printed books in that particular.”¹² Burnet had other (ecclesiological) reasons to criticize Heylyn, but he leaves his disapproval mostly in the arena of his use of sources.

Burnet is most formally engaging with two historians, the Catholic Nicholas Sanders, and the martyrologist-historian John Fox. This is appropriate since in the sixteenth century both those authors were also in conversation with each other.¹³ While Burnet consistently assumes the authority of Fox for his readers, and is of course sympathetic to him, it is how he sets himself apart from both these historians in their use of sources that is of interest for this project.¹⁴ He first explains that Fox wasn’t really intending to write a history of what happened in the Reformation itself, so Burnet is doing something different.¹⁵ “I intend not to write a pompous martyrology...I shall not enlarge on the manner of their trial and sufferings; which being so copiously done by Fox, there is nothing left for any that comes after him. In some private passages which were brought to him upon flying reports, he made a few mistakes, being too credulous; but in the account he gives from records, or papers, he is a most exact and faithful writer.”¹⁶ So while mostly he affirms his use of sources, from time to time Burnet hedges his bets in a very overt way: “Fox adds a passage that seems scarce credible; the thing is so extraordinary, and ...does not vouch any warrant for this, so that though I have set it down, yet I give no entire credit to it.”¹⁷ And in another case: “Fox has printed the letter which he avouches to prove this by. But the good man, it seems, read the letter very carelessly.”¹⁸

Nicholas Sanders, on the other hand, is the oft-recognized nemesis of Burnet’s *History*. Whether or not Burnet would have begun this project at this time without Sander’s *Schismatis Anglicani* receiving a new French translation in 1676, we will never know. Admittedly, Burnet had already accomplished two histories with documents before this time, and so had demonstrated his commitment to this line of work. Burnet says he was encouraged to write this history because of the new Sanders edition, and of course the context of the English prosecution of Catholics and the tensions between French Protestants and Louis XIV during this period would have decidedly contributed to the need for a re-enforcement of Protestant identity and a justification for the suspicion of Catholics within England.

Still, Burnet tends to disagree with Sanders on explanations of the documents rather than calling into question his worldview. This is most clear when he stops to explain why he’s going to go head to head regarding Sander’s treatment of Anne Boleyn, which at the time of the original composition was intended mainly to attack Elizabeth’s legitimacy to the throne. Burnet justifies his overt engagement with Sanders: “I know it is not the work of an historian to refute the lies of others, but rather to deliver such a plain account as will be a more effectual confutation than any thing can be that is said by way of argument which belongs to other writers. And at the end of this king’s reign, I intend to set down a collection of the most notorious falsehoods of that writer, together with the evidences of their being so. But all this of Anne Boleyn is so palpable a

¹² Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:727. Burnet is also using this a chance to criticize Sanders and impugn Heylyn by saying that the latter was just totally copying Sanders—which basically says Heylyn is crypto-Catholic because Sanders had been notorious for 100 years in Protestant historiography.

¹³ Christopher Highley, “‘A Pestilent and Seditious Book’: Nicholas Sander’s *Schismatis Anglicani* and Catholic Histories of the Reformation” (*Huntington Library Quarterly* | vol.68, nos.1 & 2, 2005), 157, 158. Highley also argues that it is clear that sources were not the main concern for Sanders—a lively narrative was more important.

¹⁴ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:65. He affirms Fox as a source who usually looked at the original documents and can even be relied upon when they aren’t existent anymore since Burnet says he himself so often saw the same sources and Fox and saw that they were good. He tells the reader that’s how they can count on things—Burnet himself is seeing the same thing as Fox.

¹⁵ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:vii; 2:570.

¹⁶ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 2:615, 616.

¹⁷ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:684.

¹⁸ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 2: 669.

lie...that I presume it will not offend the reader to be detained a few minutes in refutation of it.”¹⁹ Again, with little explanation of the significance of this argument, Burnet posits that “Sanders first published [rumors of More or Fisher writing Henry’s book against Luther], and Bellarmin and others since have taken it upon his authority. Strangers may be pardoned such errors, but they are inexcusable in an Englishman; for in More’s printed works there is a letter written by him out of the Tower to Cromwell...This shows that More knew that book was written by the king’s own pen; and either Sanders never read this, or maliciously concealed it, lest it should discover his foul dealing.”²⁰ Frankly, given the stated purpose of Burnet’s *History* to specifically counter Sanders, it is surprising that he leaves his objections to him so heavily in the realm of his use of sources.

While Burnet’s account of the Reformation is itself in no way objective, his constant appearance of engaging with the source documents and evaluating them and explaining how he came across them creates a strong impression of rationality and scientific precision. It also requires him to focus more on the work of humans, rather than the work of God. While he does think God was at work in the Reformation, his close reading of the documents shows the complexity of human motivation and the multiple possibilities for cause and effect.

“Candor and Evenness”: Thomas More, Friar Paul and other Good Catholic Scholars

From the beginning of his first volume, Burnet had his favorite Catholic historians whose theology and perspective he might not like, but whose way of doing scholarship he admired. In addition to continental historians he said that France had produced “a Thuanus, and Italy a Friar Paul...And though the last two lived and died in the communion of the church of Rome, yet they have delivered things to posterity with so much candor and evenness, that their authority is disputed by none but those of their own party.”²¹ His favorite Catholic history was clearly Friar Paul’s account of the Council of Trent which he uses both overtly and in summary. His c20 biographers Clarke and Foxcroft say he read Friar Paul’s work four or five times.²² He describes the account of the Council of Trent as being written “with as much life, and beauty, and authority, as had been ever seen in any human writing, by friar Paul of Venice, within half an age of the time in which it was ended.” Burnet explains that “when father Paul and all his friends, who knew from what vouchers he [wrote], were dead, Pallavicini, a Jesuit, who was made a cardinal for this service, undertook to answer him by another history of that council; which in many matters of fact, contradicts father Paul, upon the credit (as he tells us) of some journals and memorials of such as were present, which he perused and cites upon all occasions. ... But as for the main thread of the story, both his and father Paul’s accounts do so agree” that Burnet says he feels confident in using their relation of the facts to make his own arguments.²³ So when he can make his point using Catholic sources, he really highlights this as adding strength to his argument, such as when he uses “Morinus, a learned priest of the Oratorian order [who “in our age”] has published the most ancient rituals he could find” in order to discuss the theology of ordination.²⁴

¹⁹ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:82.

²⁰ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:713.

²¹ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:v.

²² Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:274; T. E. S. Clarke and H.C. Foxcroft, *A Life of Gilbert Burnet* (Cambridge, 1907), 151.

²³ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:437.

²⁴ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 2:297. He does this as well when he draws from Pool’s biographer to address the relationship between Queen Mary and Pool, 2:517-519. He also does some apologizing for Pool and describes Pool’s goals as to bring in a “reformation of manners”—Pool was in many ways a good sort of Catholic for Burnet, not wanting to bring in the principles of the Council of Trent, for instance, 2:599, 600.

Andrew Starkie has already pointed out that Burnet really tried to resurrect a certain view of Thomas More.²⁵ The *History of the Reformation* was written before Burnet's translation of *Utopia* but already More looms large in his account. He describes More in deeply sympathetic terms—his reputation was such that no one could blemish it, he said. He explains that even though More didn't want a total rupture with Rome, he agreed that the pope should have less power in England.²⁶ Burnet overtly uses More's account of the Maid of Kent rebellion and trial, explaining that it is clear More didn't approve of the Maid and had described her as a false and hypocritical person. In his second volume, he comes back with further evidence in the form of letters written in the tower to show that these opinions of More's had been hidden because Catholics under Queen Mary who had wanted to make Elizabeth Barton a saint and More's disapproval would have told against them.²⁷ For Burnet, More was a Catholic who was worth respecting and whose views seemed to put in him well within the Latitudinarian vision for the church.

Burnet makes heavy handed attempts to include positive perspectives on those who might otherwise be portrayed as the enemies of the Reformation. For instance, regarding the divorce he insists on "the Substance of what I gathered out of the Printed Books and Manuscripts for the Kings Cause. But the Fidelity of an Historian leads me, next to open the Arguments that were brought against it, by those who, wrote on the other side for the Queens Cause."²⁸ He records Gardiner under the Protector as writing "a letter that has more of a Christian and of a bishop in it than anything I ever saw of his....This letter will be found in the Collection for I am resolved to suppress nothing of consequence, on what side soever it may be."²⁹ He uses French writers or other outsiders to provide affirmations of people he wants to rehabilitate, such as defending Lord Wentworth's motives and skills in his defense (and eventual loss) of Calais.³⁰ This sort of attempt to include the "other side of the story" complements a narrative that for all of its celebration of Protestantism is free from any discussion of an apocalyptic conflict and which rarely invokes providence without also explaining the human motivations for actions.

Continental Protestants

Burnet's lifelong goal of getting Nonconformists to come into fellowship with the Church of England is really clear in the way he tries, as often as possible, to include Scottish Calvinist sources or other Continental Protestants in his narrative. Tony Claydon has already pointed out how European Burnet's vision of Protestantism was, and Burnet consistently stops in his narrative to give the continental perspective. But it isn't just the history of events in Europe, but theologians and church leaders themselves that Burnet cites, mostly in support of his ideal of a church that agrees on certain Protestant principles, and doesn't let other divisions get in the way of fellowship. He especially cites Bucer, both before and after he came to England, highlighting Bucer's "most tender care of preserving unity among the foreign churches."³¹ Peter Martyr fills the same role for him, allowing Burnet to call for England to avoid the conflicts over ecclesiology and the ceremony of the sacraments that had divided people in Switzerland and Germany.³² For both Scots and Continental History he relies heavily on James Melville's *Memoirs* and other documents he says haven't been printed yet.³³

²⁵ Andrew Starkie, "Contested Histories of the English Church: Gilbert Burnet and Jeremy Collier" *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 1-2 (March 2005), 348.

²⁶ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:251, 252.

²⁷ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:303-306; 2:634.

²⁸ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:208

²⁹ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 2:74.

³⁰ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 2:719.

³¹ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:187-190

³² Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 2:214-217.

³³ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 2:439, 626-706

He also uses them to explain what he means by the term “reformation”—which is something different than Protestants traditionally had used it to mean. Burnet’s focus is on a reformation of manners, a return to a way of behaving that he attributes to the primitive church. This is where he thinks the real reform needs to be and he likes to use non-English Protestants to help make his point.

Conclusion

Burnet’s intentionality in his sources, which often takes the place of providentialism, shows his interest in participating in the sort of conversation that would have appealed to part of the Latitudinarian school, as well as his commitment to a wide church under the power of the state. He only mentions the current context of the Popish Plot one time in the *History*, and his generosity to many Catholics and Catholic scholars would certainly have contrasted with the other publications (including his own!) at the time. He also takes time to comment on the evil of persecution, even under Protestants such as Henry and Edward (though he is very defensive of Elizabeth), and such criticism of prosecutions for matters of conscience may have been part of why the Country/Whig party suspected him of being not supporting their goals during the Exclusion Crisis. The very possibility of including outsiders as sources of authority, and pointing to the need for textual evidence to explain what was going on, created a tone of rationality and created space for being sympathetic readers of people who the current of the time might have labeled as “enemies”. This attempt at even-handed scholarship with a wide audience and a start toward pulling in the perspectives of people on the Continent would have been in sharp contrast to the Protestant polemic at a time when Catholics were being hanged, drawn and quartered.³⁴

³⁴ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:321-338