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Norwich Baptists and the French Revolution

IN 1789 Norwich with 40,000 inhabitants was still one of the biggest manufacturing towns in the Kingdom. The dissenters who formed a considerable proportion of the city's population, being debarred by unequal laws from the more important civic offices, naturally sat loose to the establishment and took interest in revolutionary theory. Among them were two Baptist ministers who have left records of their views and their reactions to the events in France. One was Mark Wilks who had been trained at the Countess of Huntingdon's college at Trevecca and came to Norwich to minister to a Calvinistic Methodist congregation in St. Paul's. In 1788 he declared himself a Baptist and carried the majority of the church with him.¹ The other, Joseph Kinghorn, came in 1789 from the Bristol Academy to minister to the Baptists in St. Mary's.

Kinghorn wrote from Norwich to his father, David Kinghorn, in Yorkshire, in August 1789: "I rejoice with all my heart at the destruction of that most infamous place the Bastille, which the populace are regularly demolishing without any interruption from government, who evidently dare not meddle with them."²

His view seems to have coincided with that of his fellow-citizens in general who believed that the French were adopting English notions of freedom. The fall of the Bastille made such an impression that nearly a year later the proprietor of the Norwich Vauxhall gardens was putting on an act entitled: "The Triumph of Liberty or Releasement from the Bastille"³ showing instruments of torture, skeletons and wretched victims chained in a variety of postures, while his rival at the Rural gardens staged: "Paris in an uproar or an Assault on the Bastille,"⁴ displaying the instruments of cruelty and enacting the beheading of the governor with new choruses adapted to the piece.

French advances in freedom made dissenters the more conscious of their own disabilities. Meetings were held in Norwich about seeking the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. Kinghorn wrote in November 1789:

"Our last meeting was very respectable, we had an Alderman" [Elias Norgate M.D.] "in the chair, several gentlemen and nine Dissenting ministers, all of the city. We agreed in the main things and had a very pleasant meeting. For my part I am not sanguine in

the matter but think it right to do what we can for the sake of posterity."⁵

When the matter came up in the Commons in the following Spring, William Windham, one of the Members for Norwich, declared himself the representative of a borough where there was as great a body of dissenters as in any town in the kingdom who had behaved to him with the utmost liberality. The repeal of the Acts was, however, opposed by Pitt and lost.⁶

On 14 July 1791, the second anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, Mark Wilks preached in St. Paul's chapel two sermons on the origins and stability of the French Revolution. These were afterwards published and ran into three editions. On the title page Wilks, who farmed to eke out his salary, described himself as "a Norfolk farmer." Taking his text from Acts V. 39. "If it be of God ye cannot overthrow it," he stated his opinion that the French Revolution was of God. He criticised Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution* in some detail. It was hardly to be expected that a dissenter would approve Burke's view of the Church of England. Wilks wrote, "To hear him boast of her estates, her majesty, her splendour, her orders, her gradations and her full efficiency, is enough to make a wise man mad!" Equally he found Burke's judgement at fault in his estimate of the Revolution. The National Assembly, he asserted, was one where mercy and truth met together. They wreaked their rage against principles, not persons, against tyranny not tyrants—men whose government had never been stained with one drop of human blood. The Revolution was the introduction of a Government of which reason was the author and utility the object, a government reared on the immutable basis of natural right and general happiness, which combines all the excellencies and excludes all the defects of all the various constitutions which chance has scattered over the face of the earth:—

"in the ruin of the plot against the Assembly, in the destruction of the Bastille,—the very grave of liberty—in the defeat of the officers and soldiers at Versailles, in the capture of the King and his fugitive family, the friends of freedom are bound to exclaim with the warmest gratitude divine goodness can produce, 'What hath God wrought'."

He considered the ruin of England had been inevitable but for the revolution in France. "There can be no reason to suppose the British Government holds it in aversion. Rather, we may suppose his majesty and his servants, the clergy and the laity, must admire a Revolution that prevents one here."⁷

While in Norwich Wilks was preaching up the Revolution and its well-to-do supporters were celebrating Bastille day at an expensive dinner at the Maid's Head Inn,⁷ in Birmingham the mob, stirred up to hatred of the Revolution, was wrecking Meeting-Houses and burning down Dr. Priestley's dwelling and library. Shortly after this event Joseph Kinghorn received a note:

“A few gentlemen who lament the misfortunes of Dr. Priestley and consider his as the common cause, intend meeting at Mr. Martineau’s tomorrow night at supper to consider some plan of alleviating his distress and giving a public tribute to the Doctr. and if Mr. Kinghorn will give Mr. Martineau the pleasure of his company, he will be extremely happy to see him.”

Unfortunately there is no record of Kinghorn’s reply.

The massacres and disorders in France reduced English support for the Revolution. By the end of 1791 the *Norwich Mercury* had passed from enthusiastic approval to a grudging hope that at some time in the remote future “from partial evil, general good may arise.”⁸

Kinghorn wrote to his father in November 1792:

“The troubles on the Continent I strongly hope are the fore-runners of peace & that their national ferment will tend to their purification. . . . I had some conversation a few weeks ago with a Roman Catholic Clergyman who very frankly answered every question I put to him respecting the state of the Church and Clergy of France from which I thought I could clearly see that Babylon is falling with vengeance. He represented almost the whole nation as in rebellion against the Pope that there was no legal Church authority in the Kingdom—the decrees of the National Assembly infringing on the Pope’s Prerogative so much as to set his authority aside. The successes of the French are truly astonishing by last week’s papers tho the scenes occasioned by intestine wars are really dreadful beyond imagination. What is in futurity God only knows. The signs of the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon too much apply to us Ezek. 22, 23 &c &c there is scarcely a circumstance which we do not see in England as far as ancient language can be considered as analogous to modern times.”

The execution of the French king in January 1793 and the declaration of war in the following month made the support of the Revolution appear an unpatriotic attitude. In March 1793 Joseph Kinghorn wrote to his father:

“I must tell you my surprise at finding a Proclamation from the King for a general Fast . . . For my part I am very sorry for it. The appointment of a Fast before a stroke had been struck or calamity in any way felt is unusual, to say that War is the calamity that calls for humiliation is very singular since it appears to me that this war might easily have been avoided. Had we any signs of real humiliation before God in the Hearts of our great men and that in sincerity they united before the throne of Grace to intreat mercy the case would be different but even then fasting and endeavouring to end the war would go together. Is this the case? Is the nation to be commanded to pray for the success of our Arms that their prayers may aid the designs

of those who regard not God nor consider the operation of his hands? Can we wish the destruction of a people who have just risen from slavery and on whose existence perhaps the freedom of Europe depends? I don't mean that Europe must be like France before they can be free but that if Monarchy as before was established again such power would be thrown into the hands of Courts that the people would be nothing. Would not their destruction effectually rivet the chains on ourselves? Besides how can those feel any humiliation for our being plunged in a war they earnestly wished might be averted? The sorrow of these was not so much to see the war approaching as that his Majesties Ministers never seemed desirous to stop it but rather have brought it on and I believe have been designing it for some time back. That we are guilty enough as a nation is alas too true—but will this Fast pardon our iniquities? The prayers of the wicked will not be heard neither fast-day nor feast-day—and how will the real religious part of the nation be affected—who have attended to the approaching storm and observed its motions? Will not their sorrow be increased by the very idea of this war in which we are engaged? I don't like the appointment on other accounts . . . it will operate as a trap to the Dissenters as many of them will be put in an unpleasant situation by it, while a fawning Clergy are seeking preferment by sacrificing conscience calling a worldly system the Church of Xt and increasing the national guilt by their very prayers! . . . I think of writing a sermon and reading it which tho a little unusual I think will be prudent.”

David Kinghorn wrote back disapproving of his son's views. Also he had come across an alarming rumour: “I was struck at reading in the Doncaster Newspaper that the weavers of Norwich had a shilling a week paid them while they attended at clubs and Ale houses &c and being asked why they did not work, answered they had that paid them to be ready on a call. If this is true you must have had some sons of Belial among you who have been endeavouring to blow up the Coals of Dissention into a flame and bring England into the same miserable condition with France.”

Joseph replied that he had every reason to believe the rumour a downright lie: “It would be impossible it should not be known here & there are people enough in Norwich to have propagated such a circumstance with pleasure . . . Norwich has been all along very quiet. Sentiments have been various & violent on all sides but the parties were so balanced that quietness has been the effect.”

The Fast Day on 19 April was generally observed in Norwich. The shops were shut and divine service performed in most of the churches.⁹ The principal gentlemen of the Corporation went to the Cathedral where they heard a sermon on I Peter II 17 “Fear God, honour the King.” Kinghorn at St. Mary's preached from Isaiah xlvii

10 "My counsel shall stand and I will do all my pleasure." He was determined, he said, that none should know his political sentiments from his sermon.

Early that May Kinghorn received a letter from Robert Hall from Cambridge asking him to recommend a Norwich bookseller for his pamphlet *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press and for General Liberty*. It contained, he said, nothing dangerous nor violent. All the same it was a formidable indictment of the status quo and an attack on the government which was not likely to be popular with the establishment. Kinghorn endorsed the letter with a note that he had ordered three dozen copies.

In July 1794 William Windham, one of the Members of Parliament for Norwich, joined the Cabinet as Secretary at War and consequently resigned his seat and stood for re-election. In his address to the electors he stated that he was perfectly satisfied that he had in no instance deviated from the principles which first recommended him to their favour. The reforming party thought otherwise, regarding a seat in the War Cabinet as the ultimate of treachery. Mark Wilks who had been an active supporter of Windham now became a strong opponent. The government which Windham was now joining had caused three radicals to be brought to trial for the capital charge of High Treason, Hardy, Tooke, and Thelwall, innocuous and respectable persons, as Trevelyan has described them. After the jury had found them not guilty, Windham referred to them as "acquitted felons." On Sunday 19 April 1795 Wilks preached at his St. Paul's Chapel two "collection sermons" to help defray the costs of their defence. These were subsequently printed under the title *Athaliah or the Tocsin Sounded by Modern Alarmists*. His text for both sermons was from II Kings xi 14 "Treason, treason." The sermons, he acknowledged, were "wholly political." He justified them by the assertion that his aim was to do good—"It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath day." He attacked the government in general and Windham in particular, asserting both the enormity and the absurdity of the proceedings against the radicals and arguing the necessity of the reforms they favoured.

In October 1795 the King was shot at on his way to open Parliament. The government took occasion to introduce Bills against Treasonable Practices and Seditious Meetings, giving magistrates powers of immediate arrest for seditious speech. At a Common Hall of Norwich citizens James Crowe, a former Mayor, moved a petition to Parliament lamenting the insult to the person of the King but suggesting that the present laws were adequate to deal with it and praying for a decisive negative to the Bills. Wilks spoke in favour of the motion which was duly carried.¹⁰ Not long after this one of Wilks's friends picked up in the street an opened letter from Windham to his Norwich agent which had been accidentally dropped. The text was printed by the Norwich Radicals by way of propaganda:

“Hill St., 21 November 1795.”

“One of my present objects in writing is to enquire about a fact I have heard reported from the late meeting for the purpose of a petition against the Bills now depending, viz. that Mark Wilks declared that ‘if the King consenteth to these Bills, he would not live a month’. If this be true I wish you would endeavour to get evidence of it in order that it may be considered what it may be proper to do upon it. If there is any doubt of the expressions, it would be best that no notice should be taken and at all events that any enquiry should be conducted in a manner not to excite any alarm or give them reason to suppose that it was made by any suggestion from here.”¹¹

Wilks’s daughter tells us that the discovery of this letter made him more vigilant and cautious. Already another Baptist minister, William Winterbotham, had been sent to prison for two political sermons he had preached at Plymouth and perhaps Wilks was fortunate not to have been charged. We find him speaking again in May 1797 at a Common Hall called by the Mayor on the requisition of several respectable gentlemen, which passed a resolution calling for the dismissal of His Majesty’s ministers. According to the report in the *Norwich Mercury* Wilks said that the King, once universally beloved, had lost the people’s esteem, the change being produced by men who supported the American war and continued the present conflict. The system if persisted in would endanger the quiet of all Europe. His Majesty’s happiness, nay his very existence depended on a change of men and measures.¹²

At the end of 1797 Winterbotham, released from prison, visited Norwich and preached for both Wilks and Kinghorn and for the Independants. Kinghorn writing to his father gave a critical account of him. He thought him a popular but not a masterly preacher. “The postures of attention expressed by uplifted eyes, stretched out necks and chins, to hear what the man who had been 4 years in Newgate, should say, was sometimes fit to get the better of my gravity.” He had, he thought, valuable qualities but he was not drawn to him. Kinghorn maintained his resolution not to preach political sermons, but his aloofness from politics did not please all his flock. In February 1798 he wrote to his father about a proposed journey to the North. He thought a temporary absence from Norwich would do good as some of his people had been ‘rather queer.’ “It arises partly from my not being so hot in politics as some of them & partly from the popularity of Mr. W[interbotham] whose preaching and politics pleased some very much & whom I could not praise in the lavish style used by others.”

Kinghorn made his proposed journey that summer and his absence from home was prolonged by illness. Meanwhile Wilks assisted by preaching to the St. Mary’s congregation and even taking one of the services on his first Sunday home to relieve the pressure of his return

to work after sickness. In this he gained the warm gratitude of David Kinghorn, who by no means approved of his politics but wrote: "If I should ever have the pleasure of seeing Norwich again, I shall do myself the pleasure of visiting the Farmer and viewing his cultivation, in doing which I hope neither he nor anyone else will cry Treason Treason. Give my respects to him and thank him from me for all his labours in supplying your place in your absence & upon your return."

The inspiration of the French Revolution had by now passed from English politics. Wilks continued to support the party of reform. He once more worked for Windham when he had returned to the Whig fold and stood for one of the Norfolk seats in 1806. But Wilks's political activities have left no further mark. Kinghorn summed up the general disillusion over France in a letter dated 3 April 1798: "The French are now awful scourges on the Continent, but when they have answered their end as awfully will they be punished. Exaggeration is very common among men and it is probable they are not so black as they are by some described. But besides their cruelties w^c are unequaled by anything lately in Europe — Their being most of them Infidels & many of them Atheists professedly in all the higher or (according to present times) the more active ranks of Society, and their having Strumpets drawn in Processions as Goddesses &c. &c. — is I believe quite true. I think every expectation is cut off for Europe in general except from God's Providence. All those notions of liberty which the French Revolution very generally raised a few years ago are at an end, they are the tyrants not the deliverers of men."

NOTES

¹ Sarah Wilks, *Memoirs of Rev. Mark Wilks, late of Norwich*, London 1821.

² *Joseph Kinghorn of Norwich*, A memoir by Martin Hood Wilkin, Norwich 1855, p. 163.

³ *Norwich Mercury*, 24 July 1790.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19 June and 24 July 1790.

⁵ *Joseph Kinghorn of Norwich*, p. 164. The rest of the quotations from Kinghorn are from extant letters in the possession of the writer.

⁶ *Norwich Mercury*, 6 March 1790.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9 and 16 July 1791.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10 December 1791.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 20 April 1793.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21 November 1795.

¹¹ *Norfolk Parliamentary Addresses &c 1768-1830*, Norwich City Library.

¹² *Norwich Mercury*, 20 May 1797.

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