BOOK REVIEWS


Absolute Liberty is a selection of Caroline Robbins's articles, published over a thirty-year period, whose focus is the two-way transmission of liberal political ideas between Great Britain and America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These Whig principles include the familiar ones of religious liberty, natural rights, social contract, and resistance to tyranny. For the purposes of Miss Robbins's story, the literature of resistance begins with the Reformation in the sixteenth century when Protestants argued the merits of political opposition to Catholic rulers. From the beginning, liberal ideas were associated with opposition to popery and included demands for religious liberty — at least for Protestants.

England's seventeenth-century revolution gave birth to numerous political experiments and a political literature that invoked sixteenth-century experience while arguing the rights of seventeenth-century subjects against Stuart tyranny. This literature became the canon of Whig doctrine; among its prophets were Locke, Milton, Harrington, Ludlow, Neville, and Sidney, all of whom have been discussed in Miss Robbins's earlier books, The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealth (1959) and Two English Republican Tracts (1969). Two essays in the present collection explore the minor prophets Andrew Marvell, the poet, and William Popple.

Marvell, who was regularly listed with the classical Whigs in the eighteenth century, has been variously interpreted by modern scholars as republican and monarchist. In the one piece written specifically for this book, the author examines Marvell's satires, tracts, and letters during the period 1665-1678 and concludes that he was neither a republican nor a believer in divine right. He accepted the established constitution of king and Parliament while advocating reforms. His 1677 tract, The Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government, is apparent evidence that he was a member of the "country" party in opposition to Charles II. Yet Miss Robbins cautions against the use of rigid party labels during this period and notes that Marvell
differed from many other “country” men in favoring increased tolerance for Protestant — but not Catholic — nonconformists.

Religious tolerance is also the subject of an article on Marvell’s nephew William Popple, wine merchant, civil servant, and translator of Locke’s *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689). His plea for “absolute liberty” of conscience in the preface to the *Letter* provides the title for both essay and book. Miss Robbins makes much of the fact that Popple, unlike his contemporaries, favored absolute freedom of religion for everyone, as opposed to mere toleration of differences among Protestants. One is disappointed when she fails to enlarge on this point and instead concludes that “to compare the theories about religious liberty of Popple and Locke would be rash” (p. 29).

The section entitled “Strenuous Whigs” admirably illustrates the links between British and American thought in the eighteenth century. Three men are analyzed: Francis Hutcheson, a Scottish professor whose lectures sanctioning independence for colonies were used as texts in some American colleges; Thomas Hollis, the English philanthropist who sent to Harvard College a “library of liberty”; and Thomas Pownall, onetime governor of Massachusetts and a frequent spokesman for the American cause in Parliament.

The American Revolution was the most spectacular fruit of the Strenuous Whigs’ campaign. (Miss Robbins notes all too briefly the role of the Revolution in keeping alive Whig convictions to inspire nineteenth-century reform movements in Great Britain.) A fitting summation of America’s reception of Whig tenets can be found in a delightful address Miss Robbins gave in 1974, “The Pursuit of Happiness.” She aptly describes it as a sermon, a reexamination of “familiar words . . . to illumine their meaning”; her text is taken from the Declaration of Independence. She explores the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century meanings of happiness and concludes that what Jefferson had in mind was public happiness, obtained by satisfying “the aspirations of the majority of the people living together” (p. 308). Achieving this goal required public instruction in virtue and social duty.

In addition to the subject of liberalism, the author pursues a variety of related topics such as rationalism in religion and the survival of Parliament. The breadth of her interests and her perception of the subtleties of intellectual history both enlarge and refine our understanding of the period. *Absolute Liberty* is a timely contribution to the ongoing observance of the American bicentennial.

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