BRITISH SERMONS ON NATIONAL EVENTS

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Throughout the 19th century, from the Napoleonic Wars (1804–15) to the South African War (1898–1902), numerous national events tested the full spectrum of human emotions. Some were celebratory, such as coronations, jubilees and thanksgivings for victory in war. Some were bitter-sweet, such as delight at the great naval victory at Trafalgar in 1805 clouded by the news that Lord Nelson had fallen in the battle, or the deaths in ripe old age of pillars of the nation such as George III in 1820, the Duke of Wellington in 1852, and Queen Victoria in 1901. Others were isolated tragedies that moved many but directly affected few, such as the death in childbirth of Princess Charlotte in 1817, or the collapse of the Tay Bridge in 1879 that hurled a trainload of passengers to their doom in the stormy waters below. Others again, such as the Crimean War of 1854–56 and the cholera epidemics of 1832 and 1849, had a direct impact on substantial portions of the population, who had to face up to the possibility of imminent sudden death either for themselves or for loved ones.

Context

This chapter is focused on discrete occurrences that gave rise to sermons on a single day, or within a short, defined period of time. The events under consideration here were not political in themselves, although

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some had obvious political ramifications, but were either lifecycle events concerning the royal family, the deaths of other national figures, or natural disasters and military conflicts. Clergy of all denominations responded to them in part from a sense of civic and national duty, and in part from a recognition of pastoral need and opportunity. Many such sermons were preached on prescribed national days, determined either by a central event such as a funeral ceremony or royal proclamation of a fast, in circumstances of insecurity, or of thanksgiving, in cases of celebration. On such occasions, special local church services, reportedly more numerous than normal Sunday worship, performed something of the function of radio and television in a later age, giving individuals a sense of participation in the “imagined community” of the nation as a whole. Sermons assumed a corresponding oracular significance as the closest thing to an official national statement on the event in question that most people were likely to hear. Motives for attendance could be more secular than religious, as characterized disapprovingly by Thomas Chalmers in his sermon on the death of Princess Charlotte in 1817. There was, he said, a

… set of men, whose taste for preaching is very much confined to these great and national occasions – who, habitually absent from church on the Sabbath, are yet observed, and that most prominently, to come together in eager and clustering attendance, on some interesting case of pathos or politics – who in this way obtrude upon the general notice, their loyalty to an earthly sovereign, while in reference to their lord and master, Jesus Christ, they scandalize all that is Christian in the general feeling.

Such sermons, though, were not solely linked to officially-appointed days and special services. Many clergy also took the initiative themselves in delivering similar sermons on the nearest convenient Sunday