Religious Leadership and English Dissent after the Glorious Revolution: The Role of the Rev. Dr Daniel Williams (ca. 1643–1715/16)

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Introduction

Religious leadership in the Church of England, like most state churches during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was clearly defined by its hierarchy of clergy, archdeacons, and bishops, with the Archbishops of Canterbury at the apex. In reality the crown and its ministers exercised considerable authority, not least in making appointments. For English religious dissent the question is altogether more ambiguous, yet there were leaders, not only of individual denominations but of dissent as a whole, recognised both by those within dissent and by the authorities wishing to negotiate with them. This essay is concerned with Daniel Williams, the founder of the celebrated library and trust named after him. Williams is largely remembered today because of the library, but at the time of his death in January 1715/16 he was the leading Presbyterian minister in London and therefore the acknowledged leader of religious dissent: recognised as such both nationally and internationally in Scotland and America.

Early Life

Despite Williams’s wealth and importance by the time of his death few personal details about him are known. Even those who knew him well in later life, such as his second wife and his close colleague, John Evans, could add little.1

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1 The main sources which have been used for Williams’s life are John Evans, A Funeral Sermon Occasion’d by the much Lamented Death of the late Reverend Daniel Williams, D.D. (London, [1716]); ‘Some Account of the Life of Dr Williams,’ in Practical Discourses on Several Important Subjects...by the late Reverend Daniel Williams, D.D. (London, 1738); E. Calamy, A Continuation of the Account of the Ministers...who were Ejected and Silenced (London, 1727), pp. 968–981. For a modern biography see David L. Wykes, ‘Williams, Daniel (c.1643–1716),’ Oxford Dictionary of
Williams is thought to have been born at Wrexham in North Wales, about 1643, though the identity of his parents and the date of his birth are uncertain. Nevertheless he was well connected and probably from a landowning family. Concerning his education, he himself wrote that “from five years old [I] have had no Employment besides my Studies,” and that before he was nineteen “I was regularly admitted a Preacher.”

Twenty years later he recorded that “from the 20th Year of my Age, I remember not three Lords Days wherein I have not preached in one place or other,” despite the difficulty of the times. He began preaching in 1662, a time of great trouble following the passing of the Act of Uniformity which sought to enforce conformity to the Church of England and its prescribed doctrines, and to the Book of Common Prayer. As a consequence his education and preparation for the ministry were interrupted by the political difficulties all opponents of the new regime faced. There is no evidence he received any formal university education. Evans, who preached his funeral sermon, recorded that Williams had “some Disadvantages in his Education at first setting out.”

He then “preach’d for a few Years occasionally in several Parts of England,” probably on the Welsh borders, but finding “the Times here so frowning on a Protestant Dissenter,” in about 1664, while on a visit to Lady Wilbraham (d. 1679) of Weston, near Shifnal, Shropshire, he accepted an invitation to be chaplain to the Countess of Meath (d. 1685) in Ireland. The opportunities for a dissenting minister were undoubtedly greater in Ireland, where the laws against dissenters were not enforced so strictly because of the general Protestant fear of Catholics. While in the service of the Countess he preached regularly to a joint Presbyterian-Independent congregation at Drogheda until he was called by the congregation at Wood Street, Dublin, in 1667 as colleague to Samuel Marsden (d. 1677), a moderate Independent.

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1 National Biography (Oxford, 2004). I am very grateful to Professor G.M. Ditchfield for his comments on this paper. I am also grateful to the Trustees of Dr Williams’s Library; the Keeper of Western Manuscripts, Bodleian Library, Oxford; the Trustees of the British Library; the Librarian of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts; the Librarian of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston; the Director of the University of Glasgow Archives Service; and the Rt Hon. Earl of Leven and Melville for permission to use and quote from their records.
2 Daniel Williams, A Defence of Gospel-truth (London, 1693), Preface.
3 Daniel Williams, The Advancement of Christs Interests...preached before the Right Honourable Sir John Shorter (London, 1688), Epistle Dedicatory.
4 Evans, Funeral Sermon (see above, n. 1), p. 34.
5 Ibid., p. 35.