STANDARDS FOR ADMISSION TO THE MINISTRY
OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND IN THE
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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1. Introduction

Conventional approaches to the title of my essay might suggest that there is not much that can be said about this topic. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century critics of the Church of England often accused the established Church between the Restoration of 1660 and the ecclesiastical reforms of the 1830s and 1840s of failing to have any standards for admission to the ministry; if one thing united the stereotypical younger son of the aristocracy and the impoverished curate who entered the clerical profession, so the Church’s critics argued, it was that both were woefully unqualified and unprepared for their role. It was often alleged that the Church’s hierarchy did very little to remedy the situation, being more concerned with politics and their own personal advancement than with the professional standards of the clergy under their charge. Historians of the clerical profession have in the twentieth century largely concurred with these views. While the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries on the one hand, and the nineteenth century on the other, have been held up as periods when the Church successfully tightened up its entry requirements as a prerequisite to improving the clerical profession, the period between 1660 and 1830 is usually seen as one where few, if any, professional requirements were required. It is the contention of this
essay that the Church of England did have clear and strict standards for admission to its ministry in the eighteenth century. And while these were certainly not always fulfilled, or, perhaps to put it more charitably, while these were sometimes loosely applied, nevertheless, the ideal of what were deemed to be the threshold standards for entry into the clerical profession was much higher than is usually assumed, and, as a number of recent studies have suggested, eighteenth-century bishops paid more attention to this task than traditional estimates have allowed.4

2. Standards set by the archbishops of Canterbury

In arguing my case, I will draw on the standards set by archbishops of Canterbury between 1660 and 1820, and in particular on evidence left by Thomas Secker, archbishop between 1758 and 1768.5 It might of course be reasonably argued that archbishops were likely to be atypical and not necessarily representative of what happened elsewhere, and I may be accused of citing what economists call best case examples — although in fact some of the traditional histories of the period give the impression that, as far as ordination requirements were concerned, many of the eighteenth-century archbishops were actually worse than other diocesans.6 One piece of evidence that archbishops and their officials took ordination seriously are the records in the archbishops’ registers and act-books which give full details of ordinations at Lambeth, recording information about the place of birth, the college, the degree, the age, and title of each candidate, and which bishops had ordained the candidate to the diaconate and to the priesthood.7 These records were also indexed by


6 The fact that they did not ordain at Canterbury Cathedral (but in Lambeth Palace), and the fact that, due to other commitments, they sometimes ordained by proxy, has been cited as failings: R.C. Jenkins, Diocesan Histories: Canterbury (1880), pp. 370-400.