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978-1-107-02334-5 - Richard Bancroft and Elizabethan Anti-puritanism

Patrick Collinson

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[More information](#)RICHARD BANCROFT AND ELIZABETHAN
ANTI-PURITANISM

This major new study is an exploration of the Elizabethan Puritan movement through the eyes of its most determined and relentless opponent, Richard Bancroft, later Archbishop of Canterbury. It analyses his obsession with the perceived threat to the stability of the church and state presented by the advocates of radical presbyterian reform. The book forensically examines Bancroft's polemical tracts and archive of documents and letters, casting important new light on religious politics and culture. Focusing on the ways in which Anti-Puritanism interacted with Puritanism, it also illuminates the process by which religious identities were forged in the early modern era. The final book of Patrick Collinson, the pre-eminent historian of sixteenth-century England, this is the culmination of a lifetime of seminal work on the English Reformation and its ramifications.

PATRICK COLLINSON CBE (1929–2011) was Regius Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge (1988–96) and a Fellow of Trinity College and the British Academy. The leading historian of sixteenth-century religion and politics of his generation, he was the author of many important books, notably *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (1967), *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society 1559–1625* (1982) and *The Birthpangs of Protestant England* (1988). He also published several collections of his essays, including *Godly People* (1983), *Elizabethan Essays* (1994), *From Cranmer to Bancroft* (2006) and *This England* (2011).

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City
Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107023345

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First published 2013

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by the MPG Books Group

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Collinson, Patrick.

Richard Bancroft and Elizabethan anti-Puritanism / Patrick Collinson.
p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in early modern British history)

ISBN 978-1-107-02334-5 (hardback)

1. Puritans – England – History – 16th century. 2. England – Church history – 16th
century. 3. Great Britain – Politics and government – 1558-1603. 4. Elizabeth I, Queen of England,
1533-1603 – Relations with Puritans. I. Title.

BX9333.C62 2012
274.2'06-dc23
2012023250

ISBN 978-1-107-02334-5 Hardback

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*The author of this book wishes to thank the three series editors for their
exceptional pains in making this volume possible.*

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[More information](#)*Preface**Alexandra Walsham and John Morrill*

This is Patrick Collinson's last book, written during the long terminal illness from which he died, aged eighty-two, on 28 September 2011. It was an exercise that he described to the editors as 'a kind of mental therapy', which provided a distraction from the rigours of his medical treatment, and which he completed in defiance of the deep state of exhaustion that consumed him in the remaining months of his life. When Pat knew he was dying, he entrusted us with the task of preparing the text for the press. We have undertaken this with the greatest respect, pride and love.

In this book, Collinson returns full circle to the territory he traversed in his prodigiously researched and legendary Ph.D. thesis of 1957.¹ Consisting of two hefty volumes and no less than 1,300 pages in length, it reputedly encouraged the University of London to introduce a word limit for all future doctoral candidates. When it was published in a revised and edited form in 1967, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* was quickly heralded as a historiographical landmark and its lasting influence on our understanding of the elusive and much disputed phenomenon that is Puritanism is still keenly felt.² *Richard Bancroft and Elizabethan Anti-Puritanism* is a study of the movement for Presbyterian reform of the Church of England in the second half of the sixteenth century through the eyes of its most relentless opponent. Forensically dissecting Bancroft's notoriously intemperate polemical tracts, *Daungerous Positions* (1593) and *A Survey of the Pretended Holy Discipline* (1593), and the archive of incriminating evidence against the Puritans he accumulated in the course of his career, it investigates the inner workings of the coordinated clerical and lay programme to abolish episcopacy, overhaul the structures of ecclesiastical discipline and government,

¹ Patrick Collinson, 'The Puritan Classical Movement in the Reign of Elizabeth I', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of London, 1957).

² Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (London, 1967).

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and eliminate remaining traces of ‘popery’ from Protestant worship that marked the decades after the 1559 settlement. It traces the clandestine network of classes, conferences, prophesyings and exercises by which the godly pursued their objective of bringing the English church into closer conformity with the more perfect Reformation for which they yearned. Sometimes the man who is its ostensible subject hovers off stage and in the background, overshadowed by Collinson’s ongoing fascination with the movement that Bancroft was so intent upon dismantling.

Indeed, as he explains in the introduction, this is not a conventional or complete biography. It is ‘an extended pre-history’ of Richard Bancroft as an ‘arch Anti-Puritan’.³ It briefly explores his origins in Catholic Lancashire and his intellectual formation at Christ’s College, Cambridge, and then turns to focus upon his determined attempts in the 1580s and 90s, as chaplain to Christopher Hatton and John Whitgift and then as bishop of London, to uncover and destroy what he regarded as a dangerously subversive and revolutionary threat to the Elizabethan Church and its monarchical head. The book takes the story into the seventeenth century and the first year of the reign of James VI and I, but it stops at the moment that Bancroft was made archbishop of Canterbury, an office he was to hold until his death in 1610. It ends not with an account of his constructive but divisive tenure of the primacy, but with a fresh evaluation of the Hampton Court Conference. Although James I presided over the conference and made his presence felt, it was Bancroft who ensured that the Puritan delegates, who had arrived with high hopes of securing further reform of the Church, departed feeling thoroughly humiliated and bruised. Collinson provides us with a compelling examination of how, ‘endlessly resourceful in the choice of weapons he chose to wield’,⁴ Bancroft hunted down the ringleaders of the presbyterian programme and sought to repress them, utilising the High Commission and Star Chamber, as well as the pen and the press. This was the ‘lodestar’ of his career.⁵ A corrective to the laudatory account provided by R. G. Usher in *The Reconstruction of the English Church* (1910),⁶ the book is perhaps best described as the portrait of an anti-hero. By contrast with the sympathetic picture Collinson painted of Edmund Grindal in 1979, here he cannot entirely disguise his dislike of Richard Bancroft, ‘the puppet master of anti-Puritanism’.⁷ Whereas Grindal appeared as an emblem of ‘the English Reformation in what was arguably its most creative phase’,

³ See below, p. 1. ⁴ See below, p. 222. ⁵ See below, p. 5.⁶ R. G. Usher, *The Reconstruction of the English Church*, 2 vols. (London, 1910). ⁷ See below, p. 81.

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'Calvinism with a human face',⁸ Bancroft is an altogether more ambiguous character, 'a violent, cantankerous man' whom Collinson suspects of having no more than a 'skin deep commitment to reformed religion' and whose associations with moderate Catholics and crypto-Catholics justify describing him as 'a figure *arrière de la lettre*'.⁹ In a passage Collinson quoted more than once in earlier publications, Edward Hyde, earl of Clarendon, suggested that had Bancroft lived beyond 1610 he would 'quickly have extinguished all that fire in England which had been kindled at Geneva' and wrote of his 'never enough lamented death' as a critical juncture in the origins of the Civil War.¹⁰ This is not a view that Collinson explicitly endorses here, but he clearly credits Bancroft with a decisive role in closing off one of the paths that might have been taken by the English church in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Above all, *Richard Bancroft and Elizabethan Anti-Puritanism* presents itself as 'the anatomy of a conspiratorial obsession'.¹¹ It examines the image of radical Puritanism constructed by Bancroft's feverish imagination and 'greedy appetite',¹² an image of religious republicanism and political sedition. For Collinson, this is 'a parody of Calvinism'.¹³ Coloured by his 'lifelong habit of tarring with the brush of extremism the most moderate of his opponents',¹⁴ Bancroft's writings and tracts were responsible for creating a potent and persisting myth about Puritanism's anti-monarchical and dissident tendencies. They created a conspiracy theory about the international Calvinist cause that was the mirror image of the real terrorist menace presented by Roman Catholicism. Hence Bancroft's interest in the ugly internecine quarrels that comprised the Appellant Controversy. Chapter 10 draws attention to his 'natural affinity' with the Appellants and his instinctive comparison of Presbyterians with Jesuits. 'In a sense he was dealing with the same phenomenon, and we may suspect the same strange symbiosis which had cemented Bancroft to the hottest of the Puritans.'¹⁵ Yet whereas Catholicism represented a genuine and sinister threat to Elizabethan state security, for Collinson Puritanism was, on the contrary, an essentially conservative and stabilising force with the church and nation at large.

⁸ Patrick Collinson, *Archbishop Grindal 1519–1583: The Struggle for a Reformed Church* (London, 1979), pp. 20, 125.

⁹ See below, pp. 222 and 223.

¹⁰ Collinson, *Archbishop Grindal*, p. 289 and *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society 1559–1625* (Oxford, 1982), p. 43. One is reminded of the claim that 'Archbishop Laud was ... the greatest calamity ever visited upon the English Church' (*Religion of Protestants*, p. 90). The passage from Clarendon is alluded to in chapter 11 below, p. 182.

¹¹ See below, p. 1. ¹² See below, p. 182. ¹³ See below, p. 222. ¹⁴ See below, p. 29.

¹⁵ See below, p. 188.

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Here, in keeping with the recurrent theme of most of his work, he continues to insist that, for all its internal divisions, Puritanism was not fundamentally corrosive of the status quo in either political or social terms. Its achievement was to harness the potentially turbulent and explosive energies of vernacular Protestantism and direct them in an essentially docile direction. As he wrote in *The Religion of Protestants*, its ‘animating spirit was not one of disobedience or ill-affection but of a profound veneration for order’; ‘within its own perspectives [it was] as factious and subversive as the Homily of Obedience’.¹⁶ Nor was it intrinsically secessionist, an agent of the anarchic disintegration and atomisation of the church into separate independent congregations and sects. Its chief thrust was ‘centripetal’ rather than ‘centrifugal’.¹⁷ ‘Emphatically not sectarian’ in character,¹⁸ it remained deeply committed to the concept of an inclusive national church and supportive of the notion of the royal supremacy. In *Richard Bancroft and Elizabethan Anti-Puritanism*, Collinson also reiterates his view that Puritanism was ‘the vital cord of Protestantism’,¹⁹ less an ‘insurgency against the Reformed Church of England [than] a vigorous and growing tendency within it’.²⁰ He speaks of Puritanism as ‘advancing through creeks and inlets’ and becoming an irresistible ‘tidal surge’ that could not be turned back.²¹ This was a force that he concludes even Bancroft himself could not overcome: he could not defeat the ‘almost organic linkage of the like-minded’ and ‘the impenetrable density’ of early modern society.²² He could not uproot from the fabric of Elizabethan life the Puritan values and forms of religious expression that had become so thoroughly absorbed as to be almost invisible and indistinguishable from the Protestant mainstream.

¹⁶ Collinson, *Religion of Protestants*, pp. 153, 177. See also Patrick Collinson, *English Puritanism* (London, 1983), p. 31. This vision was already implicit in *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement*, esp. p. 188.

¹⁷ Patrick Collinson, *From Cranmer to Sancroft* (London, 2006), p. xiv, and see ‘Sects and the Evolution of Puritanism’, pp. 129–44, and ‘The English Conventicle’, pp. 145–72. These essays were initially published in F. J. Bremer (ed.), *Puritanism: Transatlantic Perspectives on a Seventeenth-Century Anglo-American Faith* (Boston, MA, 1993) and W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood (eds.), *Voluntary Religion* (Oxford, 1986) respectively. See also *Religion of Protestants*, ch. 6, esp. pp. 248–50. In a paper delivered at a Past and Present conference on ‘Popular Religion’ in 1966, he did present Protestantism as ‘a solvent of parochial religion and as congregationalist in potential’, but by the time of its publication his thinking had shifted away from this position: ‘The Godly: Aspects of Popular Protestantism’, in *Godly People: Essays on English Protestantism and Puritanism* (London, 1983), pp. 1–18.

¹⁸ See below, p. 220. ¹⁹ See below, p. 218.

²⁰ Patrick Collinson, ‘Antipuritanism’, in John Coffey and Paul Lim (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 22.

²¹ See below, p. 42. The phrase also occurs in Collinson, *Archbishop Grindal*, p. 231.

²² See below, p. 217.

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In minimising the differences between Puritanism and Protestantism, this last book reinforces the central insight that underpinned all of Collinson's work: the idea that Puritanism lay above all in the eye of the beholder.²³ As he famously commented in *The Birthpangs of Protestant England*, 'it was not a thing definable in itself but only one half of a stressful relationship'. Its occurrence in contemporary discourse is an index of the 'dynamic and mutual antagonism' that existed between those who deployed the derogatory nickname 'Puritan' and those against whom it was hurled as a term of abuse. It was in the context of confrontation that this label acquired its meaning, substance and importance and its prevalence in the historical record alerts us to tensions and stresses that should be the primary object of our study.²⁴ 'Puritans', wrote Collinson in *The Puritan Character*, 'were Protestants as they were perceived in a particular set of circumstances.' Historians of Puritanism are doomed to 'sit in Plato's Cave, describing not reality but those shadows of reality which are "characters" and stereotypes'.²⁵ That lecture marked the high water mark of his extreme nominalist and relativist interpretation of this phenomenon, from which he stepped back slightly in subsequent publications. Nevertheless, he continued to resist the criticism that he had reduced Puritanism to a mere 'chimera' or optical illusion. In the essay on 'Antipuritanism' he wrote for John Coffey and Paul Lim's *Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (2008), he once again pressed the point that language did not just describe but also helped to structure reality, as a consequence of which the two became hopelessly confused. In speaking of 'the invention of Puritanism', Collinson did not mean that its adversaries created an imaginary opponent. He invoked the phrase in its classical rhetorical sense, to denote discovery rather than fabrication, and to delineate the social and cultural processes of stigmatisation by which this religious tendency was crystallised and made concrete in the public mind.²⁶ His later work investigated the part played by popular plays, pamphlets and mocking libels and rhymes (especially in the wake of the Martin Marprelate affair) in both defining and giving rise to a 'fatal binary divide' within English Protestantism, alongside the witty

²³ See below, p. 2. See also 'A Comment: Concerning the Name Puritan', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 31 (1980), 483–8.

²⁴ Patrick Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religious and Cultural Change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (New York, 1988), p. 143. For close echoes of this phrase, see 'Antipuritanism', p. 24.

²⁵ Patrick Collinson, 'The Puritan Character', in *From Cranmer to Sanroft*, pp. 122, 105 respectively. This essay was first published as *The Puritan Character: Polemics and Polarities in Early Seventeenth-Century English Culture* (Clark Library, University of California at Los Angeles, 1989).

²⁶ Collinson, 'Antipuritanism', esp. pp. 22–3.

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Theophrastan characters devised by literary writers and the ecclesiastical vitriol unleashed by clerical polemicists, chief among whom was Bancroft himself.²⁷ *Richard Bancroft and Elizabethan Anti-Puritanism* is an extended exploration of the same dialectic and of the ‘complex interaction of mirth and the world of real life politics’.²⁸ At root it too is a study of two competing and clashing visions: ‘two distorting mirrors . . . reflecting to each other complementary caricatures of the two kinds of religion in contention’ in sixteenth-century England.²⁹ It demonstrates ‘the perfect reciprocity of Antipuritanism and Puritanism’, those ‘terrible and inseparable twins’, and it asserts that the former was antecedent to the latter.³⁰ Although Collinson admits that Bancroft rarely used the word Puritan, preferring ‘precisian’ and other formulations, he suggests that he did more than anyone else to place it in ‘enduring cement’, together with the crude dichotomy that it implied.³¹ In depicting the religious landscape in terms of a ‘stark dualism’ or polarity, Bancroft helped to lay down for four centuries to come ‘the seismic divide of “church” and “chapel”’.³²

Finally, albeit largely through the lens of Bancroft’s vicious satire, this is a book that illuminates Puritanism as a distinctive religious culture. It locates its ‘lifeblood’ in the Calvinist theology of predestination³³ and in Chapters 8 and 9 describes the world of electrifying preaching and fervent extempore prayer, sermon-gadding, fasts and open air communions that structured the lives of the self-styled godly. So noisy were the pious groans that emanated from the prayer meetings conducted by the Mildenhall minister Thomas Settle in 1584 that the residents of houses further down the road complained of the disturbance.³⁴ These and other elements of Puritan voluntarism operated as ‘the very nerve spring’ of zealous Protestantism as a popular religion.³⁵ Stirring the emotions and nurturing a sense of solidarity, these shared experiences helped the saints to discern God’s work in their lives and to identify each other. Those who gathered around the bedside of the celebrated victims of demonic possession like the Throckmorton children and the London teenager Mary Glover were tightly bound together by their participation in reformed rites of exorcism. This, Collinson declares, was where ‘the true revolutionary potential of Puritanism lay’.³⁶ As the case of

²⁷ Ibid., p. 21. See Patrick Collinson, ‘Ecclesiastical Vitriol: Religious Satire in the 1590s and the Invention of Puritanism’, in John Guy (ed.), *The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the Last Decade* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 150–70; ‘The Theatre Constructs Puritanism’, in David L. Smith, Richard Strier and David Bevington (eds.), *The Theatrical City: Culture, Theatre and Politics in London, 1576–1649* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 157–69.

²⁸ See below, p. 80. ²⁹ See below, p. 38. ³⁰ Collinson, ‘Antipuritanism’, p. 30.

³¹ See below, p. 221. ³² See below, p. 3. ³³ See below, p. 221. ³⁴ See below, p. 133.

³⁵ See below, p. 50. ³⁶ See below, p. 149.

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the pseudo-Messiah William Hacket reveals, this kind of Puritan devotion shaded into forms of enthusiasm that were reflective of inner frictions and unruly passions at the heart of the movement. It indicates the 'permeable membrane' that separated Puritan religiosity from tendencies that might seem opposite to it.³⁷ Delineating the contours of Puritanism as 'a potent, catching culture', no less than as a doctrine, ideology and discipline was the supreme achievement of Collinson's long and fertile career.³⁸

The many subtle and sophisticated threads of thinking that were hallmarks of his published work are thus once again skilfully woven together in this, his last, book. It fulfils the prophecy and wish of his doctoral supervisor, Sir John Neale, that Puritanism was the subject to which Collinson would devote the rest of his working life. In the preface to *Godly People*, he described how as a student he had laughed inwardly at Neale's comment and dreamt of breaking free into other centuries and research fields, but that thirty years later he remained 'an unsuccessful escapologist', still 'striving to understand the politics, mentality and social relations of the Elizabethans and Jacobeans'.³⁹ Nor did he achieve this feat in the three decades that followed. At the very end of his life, he continued to be drawn magnetically back to the topic with which he had begun his apprenticeship as a historian and of which he made himself the unsurpassed expert and master.

The text published here is the typescript as revised and resubmitted to us by Pat in August 2011. It should be noted that although the footnotes were mostly in place by that time, he was not in a position to check his transcriptions and references prior to his death, or to follow up additional material. Most of the book was written in Devon, with access only to his own personal notes on manuscripts (some of them dating from the 1950s) and to a limited library of books, though he did make use of Early English Books Online. In editing the book, we have silently corrected typographical and other minor errors, eliminated some topical allusions and areas of repetition in various chapters, checked and amended missing and muddled footnotes, and supplied more precise references to direct quotations from primary sources. We have resolved as many queries and rectified as many omissions as possible, but it has not been possible to do so exhaustively or comprehensively. There remain passages where referencing is light and where mistakes and inconsistencies may still persist. Following the original

³⁷ See below, p. 139.

³⁸ Patrick Collinson, 'Elizabethan and Jacobean Puritanism as Forms of Popular Religious Culture', in Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales (eds.), *The Culture of English Puritanism, 1560–1700* (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 56.

³⁹ Collinson, *Godly People*, p. xi.

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typescript, spelling, punctuation and capitalisation have been modernised in quotations from contemporary texts, but not in the titles of published works. Pat systematically capitalised Puritan in the typescript and we have respected and preserved that usage. Alex Walsham undertook the detailed editing of the text and footnotes and drafted this preface; John Morrill reviewed the latter, prepared the index, and supplied the cross-references. Ethan Shagan cast a discerning eye over the final revised typescript and guided us in making some key decisions.

We are very grateful to Helen Collinson and her partner Julian for identifying the electronic files of the book on Pat's computer and sending them to us. Mark Ellwood did sterling and meticulous work in standardising and formatting the manuscript in the early stages of editing and we are indebted to him for saving us much time and effort. We also owe thanks to Giles Mandelbrote and Arnold Hunt for helping to sort out footnotes to manuscripts in Lambeth Palace Library and the British Library at the last minute. Liz Friend-Smith at Cambridge University Press has, as always, been a great pleasure to work with and a source of constant support. It is particularly fitting that the final book written by the former Regius Professor of Modern History in this University should be published in the Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History series, and we are honoured that he offered us the opportunity to do so.

Cambridge, February 2012

AW and JM

Abbreviations

BL	British Library, London
Bodl.	Bodleian Library, Oxford
CUL	Cambridge University Library
LPL	Lambeth Palace Library, London
ODNB	H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Howard Harrison (eds.), <i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i> (61 vols., Oxford, 2004)
SP	State Papers
TNA	The National Archives, Kew

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