

George Larkin and the London literary underground 1666-1690

Martin Dzelzainis

Royal Holloway, University of London

Upon reform you have long known my opinion—but *radical* is a new word since my time—it was not in the political vocabulary in 1816—when I left England—and I don't know what it means—is it uprooting?

(Lord Byron to John Cam Hobhouse, 22 April 1820, Ravenna)¹

The circulated paper is part of a book on print culture that is nearing completion, provisionally entitled *The flower in the panther: truth telling, print, and censorship in England, 1662-1695*.² That is to say, it deals with the period that saw the imposition and collapse of the system of pre-publication censorship laid down in the Licensing Act of 1662, which was renewed in 1665, lapsed in 1679, was revived in 1685, and finally expired in 1695. There is still debate whether the Act succeeded in extinguishing the 'atmosphere of free debate ... which had made most of the two previous decades so exciting and disturbing' (Ronald Hutton) or whether, notwithstanding its provisions, 'a public sphere in the Habermasian sense did emerge in later seventeenth-century England' (Steve Pincus). A more fundamental question perhaps is whether early-modern censorship ever took the form familiar to us of a confrontation between state and writer. For while the modern concept of the state as an entity separate from rulers and ruled was developed in the seventeenth century, in practice the authorities lacked the means to construct and police a regime of censorship of the kind which we now associate with the impersonal agency of the state. Nor is it clear that we can safely identify the writer of the text with the figure of the author, since the author was arguably whoever could be held legally to account for a work even if they did not actually write the words of the text. This put printers or booksellers in the firing line, and it is possible that the aim of those implementing the Licensing Act was simply to prevent the physical production and dispersal of books rather than to root out the authors of sedition and their patrons. The problem is thus to provide an historically authentic account of print and

¹ *'Between two worlds': Byron's letters and journals*, Volume 7: 1820, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (London, 1977), p. 81; quoted by Conal Condren, 'Radicals, Conservatives and Moderates in Early Modern Political Thought: A Case of Sandwich Islands Syndrome?', *History of Political Thought*, 10 (1989), 525-42 (at 533).

² 'I was at [Dover's printing-] house, to compare a *Flower*, which I found in the *Panther* (a dangerous Pamphlet) that *Flower*, that is, the very same *border*, I found in his house; the same mixture of Letter, great and small in the same Case, and I took a Copy off the Press' (Roger L'Estrange, in *An Exact Narrative of the Trial and Condemnation of John Twyn* (1664), p. 61.

ensorship at precisely the point when some of the categories we now regard as crucial to such an account – the author and the state – were in the process of being developed and articulated. In short, the book addresses the question of why the restored monarchy proved unable to institute what Henri-Jean Martin calls a ‘typographical absolutism’ of the kind associated with Richelieu and Colbert.³

The chapter in the book on the role of printers in the production and distribution of seditious texts of course discusses the three who were executed in the second half of the seventeenth century: John Twyn (1664), William Disney (1685), and William Anderton (1693). The case of Anderton, who was executed for printing two Jacobite texts, is particularly damaging to the whiggish assumption that the Williamite regime of the 1690s was somehow more benign in its intentions towards the press than its predecessors. But these are relatively uncomplicated cases, which is why I’m interested in George Larkin (c.1642-1707), a printer, bookseller and author who has been overlooked in standard accounts of the London literary underground. He does not feature in Neil Keeble’s *Literary culture of nonconformity*, or the *DNB* or, more surprisingly, the *Biographical dictionary of British radicals in the seventeenth century*, edited by Greaves and Zaller. Yet even a glance at the list of works he printed – from John Bunyan’s *Grace abounding* (1666) to Henry Care’s *Animadversions upon mijn heer Fagels letter* (1688) – suggests that he should be considered alongside the likes of John Darby or Francis Smith. An account of Larkin’s activities in the 1660s, 1670s, and 1680s in fact encapsulates the major turning-points in the development of print culture under the later Stuarts. At the same time, his career calls into question our notion of what a seventeenth-century British radical was like – if such an animal ever existed.

We should remember, as my epigraph from Lord Byron makes clear, that ‘radical’ was a term which did not even enter the ‘political vocabulary’ until the nineteenth century. To describe any early-modern person as a radical is thus to run the risk of gross anachronism. We need to bear in mind at all times our propensity to convert the past ‘into a version of present verities’. Otherwise, as Conal Condren has remarked, history does indeed become a pack of tricks we play upon the dead.⁴ Richard Greaves concedes the terminology is anachronistic but insists it is useful for historians, providing care is taken not to ‘read back modern notions of “radicalism” into the age of Charles II and James II’. But in that that case, what does Greaves mean by the term? It certainly involves much more than dissent from the powers that be: ‘the mere act of opposing a regime is not enough to make one a radical; the advocacy or implementation of revolutionary goals is the determining factor’. Radicals were those ‘who

³ Henri-Jean Martin, *The French Book: Religion, Absolutism, and Readership, 1585-1715*, trans. by Paul Saenger and Nadine Saenger (Baltimore and London, 1996), p. 37.

⁴ Condren, ‘Radicals, conservatives and moderates’, 527-8.

espoused active disobedience of the law, particularly in the form of such activities as rebellion, assassination, the publication of allegedly seditious literature, and the use of violence to prevent legally constituted authorities from enforcing the law'.⁵ At first sight, placing publishing on a par with other activities such as rebellion and assassination seems an obvious instance of what we are supposed to avoid: the imposition of our sense of priorities upon those of the past. But in this case it would be true to say that this was also the seventeenth-century view of the matter, or, more precisely, the view of those in authority. Looked at in this light, what kind of “radical” was George Larkin? By way of answering that question, I’ll give a brief resume of his career in successive decades.

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First the 1660s. Larkin began his career in 1666 by printing the first edition of Bunyan’s *Grace abounding*. According to Christopher Hill, who thinks that ‘Bunyan chose his printers because of their radicalism’, the job was only assigned to Larkin because his usual publisher, the Baptist Francis Smith, was subject to searches.⁶ Presumably, Larkin came into contact with Bunyan or Smith through the dissenting community (Larkin belonged to a congregation at Clerkenwell Green). After this, Larkin went completely underground, printing Ralph Wallis’s *Room for the cobbler of Gloucester and his wife with several cartloads of abominable irregular, pitiful stinking priests*, an anticlerical satire, and more significantly, Andrew Marvell’s *Second advice to a painter* and *Third advice to a painter*, poems which effectively inaugurated the tradition of state satire. Once again, Smith was probably involved, having tried to get the *Advices* printed in July 1667.

Larkin was then caught up in a series of searches in Southwark in 1668. When Roger Norton searched his house ‘for the bookes stiled The Cobbler of Gloucester and Advice to the Painter) [Larkin] fled out of the back doore and escaped, but he found seuerall of the s^d Bookes’.⁷ A printing press was also seized at the house of Elizabeth Poole (presumably the interregnum radical of that name) in a set of tenements known as the Mint, one of the so-called “liberties”, located west of St George’s parish church, itself just below the King’s Bench prison. Poole plausibly claimed to know nothing of the comings and goings of her tenant who had set up the press in a garret. The unnamed printer was not even arrested. Elizabeth Calvert (the widow of Giles) was apprehended in the raid and committed to the Gatehouse for keeping a press and ‘for vending & publishing unlicensed & Scandalous

⁵ Greaves, *Enemies under his feet: radicals and nonconformists in Britain, 1664-1677* (Stanford, CA, 1990), pp. vii-viii.

⁶ See Christopher Hill, *A turbulent, seditious, and factious people: John Bunyan and his church* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 287-91. But Hill too neglects Larkin – strangely, given that Larkin published another six works by Bunyan in 1688 to 1689 (Wing B5480, B5510, B5522, B5545, B5549, and B5595). Larkin is not mentioned at all in Bunyan, *Grace abounding and other spiritual autobiographies*, ed. John Stachniewski with Anita Pacheco (Oxford, 1998).

⁷ House of Lords Record Office (hereafter HLRO), Committee Book, H.L. 20 March 1677, f. 166.

Bookes & Pamphlets'.⁸ But when Calvert was eventually proceeded against it was for a different offence committed several weeks later on 20 May 1668. Moreover, it was not until 1670-71 that she was actually indicted, tried, and convicted in connection with *Directions to a painter, for describing our naval business*, which featured four advice poems.

When belatedly indicted, Calvert faced three witnesses.⁹ Joshua Waterhouse was an apprentice printer freed by Calvert in August 1669. Thomas Willis had been committed to the Gatehouse in 1668 'for dispersing scandalous & seditious Pamphlets' and so could speak to her publishing the *Directions*.¹⁰ That leaves Larkin, who turns out to have been both a printer of seditious libels *and* an informer against fellow members of the underground. His name and his wife's also appear on the indictments of John Darby and Nathan Brookes. He had become an informer for L'Estrange by October 1670, when Arlington authorized conditional immunity for Larkin 'from whose Wife it seems you haue recieved some considerable helps (by the Priuity and direction of her husband) towards your late discouery of seditious Phamphetts[sic]'.¹¹ With Larkin (who had presumably printed the *Directions* at Poole's house) now cooperating, the way was clear for a prosecution of Calvert.¹²

So the first phase of Larkin's career was brief and spectacular. First he prints a classic spiritual autobiography, a caustic anticlerical satire, and unquestionably the most important political satires of the decade. And then he's turned by the authorities Does that make him a radical? Does that mean he stopped being one? Can you become a radical again having stopped once before? Or is it somewhat like being an alcoholic, which you always remain even if you're currently abstaining?

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For the duration of the 1670s Larkin was in L'Estrange's pocket. Having lost his Southwark press, he was set up as a printer in Westminster by the royalist Captain John Seymour who in 1669 was granted the lucrative right to print almanacs. This challenged the Stationers' presumed monopoly in almanacs, and they used their powers of search and seizure to put Larkin out of business. Seymour responded by moving his press – still managed by Larkin –

⁸ The National Archives (hereafter NA), SP 44/30/28r (*CSPD* 1667-1668, 363).

⁹ See Corporation of London Records Office (hereafter CLRO), Sessions File 205.

¹⁰ NA, SP 44/28/12r (*CSPD* 1667-1668, 178).

¹¹ NA, SP 44/34. f.52r (misnumbered 54) (*CSPD* 1670, 486). For a draft text, see SP 29/251/136 (*CSPD* 1668-1669, 133-34; undated).

¹² The crucial piece of evidence is a list of presses seized by the Stationers, probably drawn up in 1677 at the time when the Lords Libels Committee was meeting, in which the first item is 'One Press set upp in the Rules of the Kings Bench by one George Larkin at which was printed Advise to a Painter, Cobler of Gloucester Dyers Works all brought to Whitehall' (Stationers' Company, Box A, envelope 11, item (ii) (Reel 97); for a draft, with the date 'Anno 1668' struck through, see item (i)). The "rules" comprised an area outside the walls of the King's Bench prison and covering about two thirds of St George's parish where prisoners were allowed to live on payment of a security, though for legal purposes the area counted as an extension of the prison walls. Geographically, the Mint was comprehended within the Rules.

to Putney, where it was nevertheless subjected to further raids.¹³ But it would be a mistake to infer that Larkin had shifted ground ideologically. What mattered about Seymour was that he was both in dispute with the Stationers and able to supply work to Larkin and other printers. That's also how it seemed to the Stationers. According to Warden Mearne, 'there is noe man y^t is obnoxious to the Company but he flyes to M^r Seymour'. He had in mind not only Larkin but also Francis Smith who he alleged was 'an Agent for M^r Seymour'.¹⁴

The proceedings of the Lords Libels Committee, appointed in February 1677 to investigate a spate of opposition pamphlets, turned into a personal contest between Mearne for the Stationers and Seymour and L'Estrange, who were acting in concert. Their printed *Case of libels* alleged that 'the Chief men of the Company do both Sell, and Connive at many of those Libells, which they are Comanded to Search for, and Discover'; 'give Notice beforehand of a Search to be made'; or 'do sometime put off Searching till things may be removed out of the way'.¹⁵ The broadside ended with an account of the pressures to which printers were subjected by the grandees. Indeed, the printer was always liable to become the fall guy in any investigation of a seditious work which failed to net those who were responsible for its production – in many cases, the very stationers doing the investigating! High-level political protection counted for little with the grandees, and any printer who relied on it was running a risk. Political authority did not trump peer pressure and commercial interest.

Conversely, the Company argued that it diligently suppressed seditious libels and that it was actually Seymour and L'Estrange who were the agents of subversion. Larkin got caught in the crossfire when Mearne accused Seymour of employing Larkin as his printer and Smith as his agent and Seymour countered by implicating Mearne in the distribution of politically subversive works, as demonstrated by the 'Reasonable and Seditious Expressions taken out of Dyers Sermons'.¹⁶ In short, Mearne protected Company insiders when they published Dyer but seized the same work when printed by outsiders like Larkin.

¹³ See Cyprian Blagden, *The stationers' company: a history, 1403-1959* (London, 1960), pp. 193-5. For a resume of the arguments on either side of the case, see Stationers' Company, Court Book D, 4 February 1672, fos. 195v-196v (part III, Reel 56); *CSPD* Additional 1660-85, 445. Mearne told the Lords Libels Committee that 'two or 3 presses are sett up at Putney by Capt Jo: Seymour, and his cheife printer printed the Aduice to the Painter and the Cobbler of Gloucester' (HLRO, Committee Book, H.L., 10 March 1677, f. 155).

¹⁴ HLRO, House of Lords Committee Book, H.L., 20 March 1677, f. 165-6.

¹⁵ [John Seymour], *The case of libels* (n.p., n.d.), HLRO, House of Lords Papers, 1676/7, item 338, f. 121r. To the best of my knowledge this is the only surviving copy of this broadside, though others were distributed. There is a reasonably full resume in the printed version of the Committee's proceedings, Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Ninth report*, Appendix 2 (House of Lords MSS), pp. 69-79 (at p. 76).

¹⁶ HLRO, House of Lords papers 1676/7, item 338, fos. 119-20 (HMC, *Ninth report*, Appendix 2 (House of Lords MSS), p. 75 (g)).

So by the mid-1670s an unlikely anti-Company coalition had formed, comprising L'Estrange, Seymour, and those who were 'obnoxious to the Company' like Larkin and Smith. Actuated by the principle that my enemy's enemy is my friend, agents of the state and those opposed to it (or who at least wished to capture its machinery for their own political ends) could co-operate with each other. But in doing so were these opposition figures furthering or compromising their radical aims?

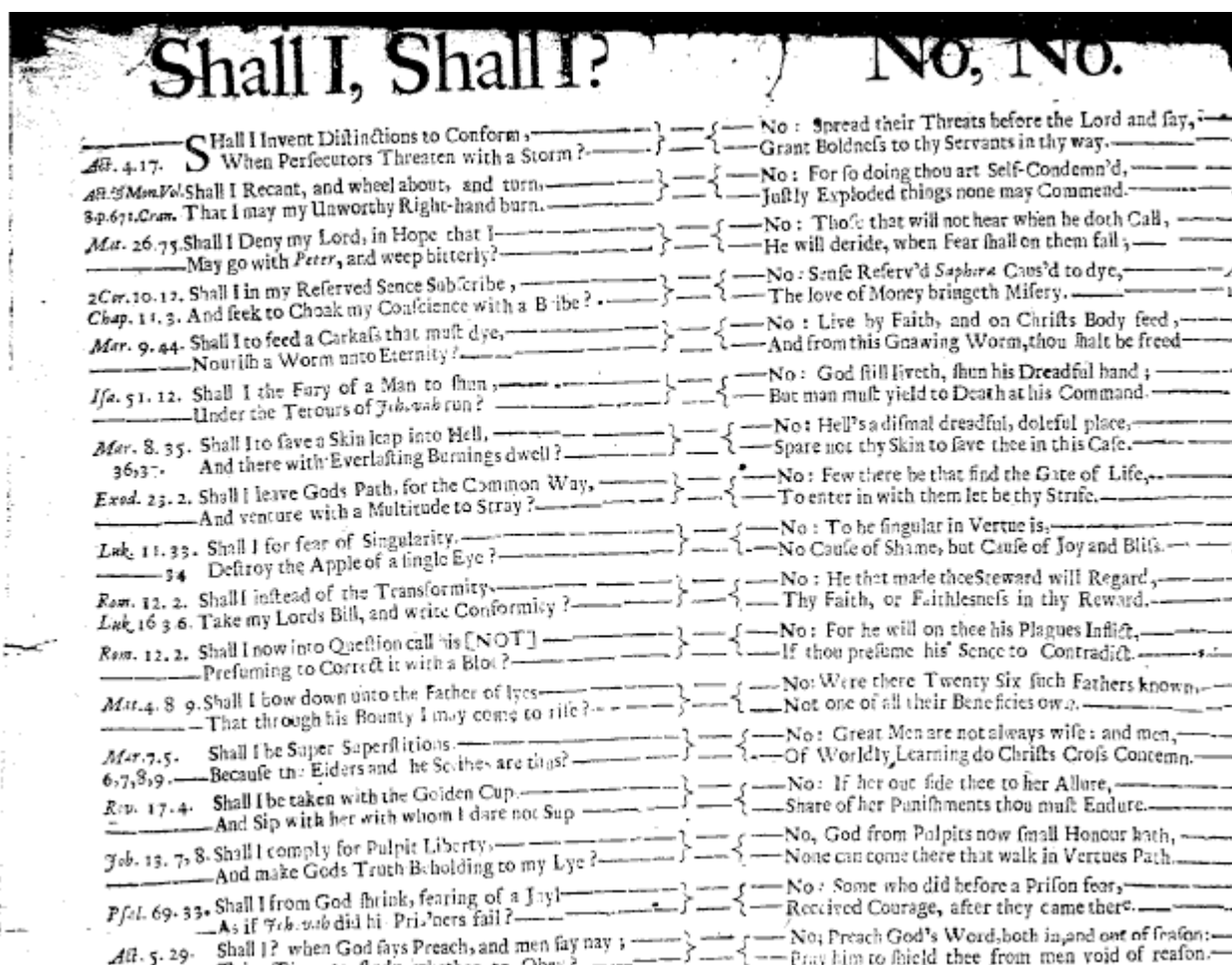
The coalition did not survive the lapse of the Licensing Act in June 1679 or the Exclusion Crisis, when Smith worked with Titus Oates and Shaftesbury and Larkin set up his own press again. Smith, however, was abroad or in prison between 1681 and 1688 and Larkin therefore assumed greater importance as a Baptist publisher, printing works by William Kiffin, Benjamin Keach and William Pardoe among others. But it was as the Tory Reaction gathered pace in the 1680s that Larkin both produced works which challenged the legality of ecclesiastical courts and acted as a publisher of prison-writings from Newgate and elsewhere.

Some of his commercial imprints also carried a political charge William Dockwra's 1681 prospectus for the penny post was backed by the Whigs. Dockwra's partner, Robert Murray, was one of Shaftesbury's agents while another "undertaker" was the republican Henry Neville. *Heraclitus Ridens* warned of the threat posed by the penny post: 'There was never anything so favourable to the carrying on and managing Intrigue ... That and the Press being unpadlockt, are two incomparable twins of the Liberty of the Subject! One may Write, Print, publish and disperse ingenious Libels ... and no body the ... wiser for it'.¹⁷ In 1682, Larkin printed two editions of *An account of the province of Carolina* for Francis Smith. The prospectus was written by Samuel Smith, Locke's successor as Shaftesbury's secretary. Although colonists were being sent out, witnesses to the Rye House Plot revealed that the Carolina project had become a cover for negotiations between the English and Scottish conspirators. Finally, Ichabod Chauncey, whose *Innocence vindicated* Larkin printed in 1684, was a member of the Castle Street congregation and two electioneering clubs in Bristol, which were also connected with the Rye House Plot.¹⁸

¹⁷ See Susan E. Whyman, 'Postal Censorship in England 1634-1844', pp. 10-12, available at www.postcomm.gov.uk/about-the-mail-market/uk-market-reviews/postalcensorship.pdf

¹⁸ See K. H. D. Haley, *The first earl of Shaftesbury* (Oxford 1968), pp. 231-55, 242-8, 365-6, 705-7; for *The fundamental constitutions of Carolina* (1669), see John Locke, *Political essays*, ed. Mark Goldie (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 160-81. For the Rye House Plot, see Thomas Sprat, *A true account and declaration of the horrid conspiracy against the late King* (London, 1685), pp. 25-6, 65, 91, 101, 106, 116, 130, and *Copies of the information and original papers relating to the proof of the horrid conspiracy against the late king* (London, 1685), pp. 16, 35, 48, 55, 95, 104, 127-8; and Richard L. Greaves, *Secrets of the kingdom. British radicals from the popish plot to the revolution of 1688-1689* (Stanford, 1992), pp. 35, 97, 137, 163-4. For Bristol, see Jonathan Barry, 'The Politics of Religion in Restoration Bristol', in *The politics of religion in restoration England*, ed. Tim Harris, Paul Seaward, and Mark Goldie (Oxford, 1990), p. 176; Douglas R. Lacey, *Dissent and parliamentary politics in England, 1661-1689* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1969), p. 162; Ichabod Chauncey, *Innocence vindicated*, pp.

In April 1684 Larkin's luck ran out, when he printed (having possibly written) a broadside, *Shall I, shall I? no, no* (London, 1684; entered to Larkin on 4 April: Stationers' Register, III: 232), which was modelled on Tobias Bowne's racy ballad, *Shall I? shall I? no, no ... tune of the doubting virgin* ([London], 1684; Wing B3895) and intended to dissuade those tempted to conform to the Church of England. He was tried for seditious libel, fined and sentenced to the pillory.¹⁹ When James II succeeded his brother in February 1685, he



Detail: *Shall I, shall I? no, no* (London, 1684: Wing S2959)

immediately turned to tightening controls over the press. L'Estrange was knighted and again authorized to track down treasonable, seditious and scandalous publications. But well before the Licensing Act was renewed in June, Larkin had fallen silent. Only four works appeared from his Broad Street printing house in 1685, though one, *The Observer proved a trimmer*, was a highly effective attack on L'Estrange that went into four editions. L'Estrange

3-4; Jim Benedict, 'Chauncey, Ichabod (1635–1691)', *Oxford dictionary of national biography* [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/5195>]. It is unclear whether the Dr John Griffith whose work Larkin also published is the same as the Dr John Griffith (or Griffeth) who was a member of the Bristol 'club'.

responded by publishing intercepted correspondence between Larkin and his associates and James Jones, the keeper of a coffeehouse in Southwark and pastor of a Baptist congregation, who was imprisoned in the Wood Street Counter. Larkin had earlier published three works by Jones, and was negotiating for a fourth. On 10 December 1684, the bookseller Enoch Prosser wrote to Jones seeking to allay his anxieties about whether the project would be compromised by Larkin's political reputation. Prosser astutely observed that

As to what is objected, that Mr Larkin is Obnoxious to the Government, I think it will be very hard to find any man fit to publish this Book that either is not or will be esteemed so, upon his publishing such a Book, under the present Complexion of the times.²⁰

In other words, the political climate was such that rather than Jones's book being compromised by a printer who was 'Obnoxious to the Government', any printer was liable to be rendered obnoxious by the book itself.

On 12 December, Larkin dealt with Jones's doubts about his commitment to the Baptist cause. While he had maintained his beliefs since 1666, there were admittedly occasions on which he might be thought to have wavered. Appearing as a witness against Darby had displeased some 'Friends' though Larkin was unwilling 'to acknowledge my Evil therein'. He had never baptized his children, but conceded that he had received communion in Clerkenwell and Oxford. And since moving to Broad Street in 1683 he had attended services in his local parish church by way of trying to avoid excommunication, though he could never bring himself fully to conform.²¹ In short, Larkin had more or less lived up to the uncompromising position staked out in *Shall I, shall I? no, no* in resisting occasional conformity. Jones must have been reassured since what appears to be the work in question, *Some considerations concerning ecclesiasticall proceedings* was entered on 6 February (Stationers' Register, III: 270; signed by Larkin's servant, Edward Reyner) – that is, *after* L'Estrange's attempt to discredit Larkin in the eyes of the dissenters by publishing these letters. It was never printed because Larkin himself was probably in Newgate. If we define radicalism in terms of commitment to a defined community, as Ann Hughes did when discussing the Levellers, then Larkin in the mid-1680s certainly answers to that description.

In that case, however, what are we to make of Larkin's *volte face* in the latter part of the decade? He returned to printing in 1686 after James II abandoned his policy of persecuting

¹⁹ The Proceedings of the Old Bailey Ref: s16840409-1, available at <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>.

²⁰ Roger L'Estrange, *The Observator*, vol.2. numb. 198, Saturday, 10 January, 1684/5.

²¹ L'Estrange, *The Observator*, vol. 2, numb. 197, Thursday 8 January 1684/5.

dissenters and turned to wooing them instead. In April 1687, the king issued a Declaration of Indulgence, a use of the prerogative to suspend the penal laws that shocked Anglicans but was precisely what Catholics and some dissenters had been hoping to see. Larkin now collaborated closely with Henry Care, who had earlier been a leading publicist for antipopery.²² A stream of pro-Indulgence works issued from Larkin's press at the Two Swans and from February 1688 Larkin also printed Care's *Publick Occurrences Truly Stated*, a newspaper which consistently voiced the *official* point of view.

Had Larkin again abandoned his principles? What we should bear in mind is that support for James's new stance was in fact wider than is often supposed and, as Mark Goldie remarks, this makes it 'historically inappropriate to persist with the manichean idiom of a totalitarian Stuart Babylon confronted by revolutionary whig purity'. More particularly, it would be a mistake to see the majority of Whigs who did not accommodate themselves to the new royal strategy as cast 'in the mould of heroic freedom fighters, clandestinely plotting the tyrant's overthrow – and correspondingly to see the turncoat minority as quislings'.²³ Far from just cashing in on the commercial possibilities, there is evidence that Larkin's support for James's programme was grounded on principle. Jones's *Grand case of subjection to the higher powers*, which Larkin printed in 1684, had featured an appendix that asserted the 'Kings Supream Power in Ecclesiastical Matters'. And Larkin also appears to have belonged to the significant minority, including several commonwealthsmen, who could not reconcile themselves to the incoming regime of William and Mary in 1688. When Gilbert Burnet abandoned his earlier insistence on passive obedience and argued in *A pastoral letter* (1689) that allegiance was owed to those who were in actual possession of the throne, Larkin printed John Lowthorp's *Letter to the bishop of Sarum: being an answer to his lordships pastoral letter* (n.p., 1690; Wing L3334). For printing this attack on an influential Williamite, Larkin once more found himself in the Old Bailey in July 1690 (alongside two Jacobites) and was 'Remanded to Newgate, but not without a very severe and sharp Reprimand from the Court, telling him, That they would Inspect very narrowly into such a Crime, and that he must not think to put Tricks upon the Government'.²⁴

Larkin thus achieved the feat of being imprisoned for printing work unacceptable to the powers that be in the reigns of Charles II, James II and William and Mary. While certainly not a radical in the nineteenth-century sense of exhibiting pure and unbending revolutionary zeal, Larkin's career *is* explicable in terms of consistent religious and political commitments. And while it is true that he was prepared to compromise under duress, he was also prepared to

²² See Lois G. Schwoerer, *The Ingenious Mr. Henry Care, Restoration Publicist* (Baltimore and London, 2001), pp. 168, 218-19, 222.

²³ Mark Goldie, 'John Locke's Circle and James II', *Historical Journal*, 35 (1992), 557-86 (at 559), and 'James II and the Dissenters' Revenge', *Bulletin of Historical Research*, 66 (1993), 53-88 (at 55).

²⁴ The Proceedings of the Old Bailey Ref: s16900717-1, available at <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>.

take risks when necessary. Perhaps the moral of the story is that there are no radical lives pure and simple, rather that people in the seventeenth century lived their lives with ‘radical moments’ as and when they could.²⁵

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²⁵ Condren, ‘Radicals, conservatives and moderates’, 540 (quoting Colin Davies).