

A NEGLECTED ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY?
FREDERICK CORNWALLIS (1768-1783)

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Ever since the well-known novel by Kingsley Amis introduced us to Lucky Jim's famous journal article, it has seemed rather foolhardy to introduce the expression 'neglected', and still less, 'strangely neglected', into any form of academic discussion. For, of course, not all neglect is 'strange', and not all neglect is unjustified. But as archbishop of Canterbury, Frederick Cornwallis has either been marginalised or accorded a bad press as typical of complacent Georgian churchmanship. Such was the conventional verdict of the early twentieth century, evident, for example, in A.W. Rowden's *The Primates of the Four Georges* (1916), and this impression received reinforcement in the very brief references to Cornwallis in Edward Carpenter's *Cantuar. The Archbishops in their Office* (1971). More recently, Brian Young's distinguished *Religion and Enlightenment in eighteenth-century England* (1998) made just one allusion to Cornwallis, in highly dismissive terms. 'As a result of the complaisant Establishmentarianism of the likes of Cornwallis', wrote Dr Young, 'the Church would lay itself open to the incursions of Evangelical thought and the reaction of 'Orthodoxy' which culminated in the Oxford Movement'.¹ Cornwallis, it would seem, was neglectful as well as neglected.

Yet Cornwallis was Archbishop of Canterbury during particularly momentous times for Britain as a whole and for the Church of England. His archiepiscopate coincided with the breakdown of relations between Britain and its thirteen North American colonies, the outbreak of the American War and the world-wide conflict into which it developed. American Independence brought a crisis for Anglicanism as the Episcopal Church in the colonies suffered very heavily for its loyalty to King George III. In 1768, the year of Cornwallis's nomination, the controversial election of John Wilkes as Member of Parliament for Middlesex precipitated a nationwide campaign of agitation and irreverence, in which anti-clericalism played a considerable part. Two years earlier, the publication of Francis Blackburne's *The Confessional* had provoked the sharpest



Fig. 1 Portrait of Archbishop Cornwallis by Nathaniel Dance (reproduced by courtesy of Lambeth Palace Library).

dissension within the Church since the Bangorian Controversy in the reign of George I. There seems, in other words, to have been a striking disparity between the magnitude of the events of Cornwallis's primacy and the stature of the man himself. That sense of disparity, moreover, is heightened by the way in which much of what is widely known about Cornwallis tends to be at the level of trivia. George III is widely reported to have disapproved of the entertainments – known as 'routs' – held by Cornwallis's wife at Lambeth, and insisted that a stop be put to such 'improprieties'.² There is certainly evidence that Caroline Cornwallis played whist in a company which included Edward Gibbon – who was not exactly a pillar of the Church.³ In 1775, with America in revolt, we

find Cornwallis engaged in bitter litigation to establish the extra-parochial status of Lambeth Palace in order to avoid the payment of the poor rate. 'When the Churchwardens come, [I will] answer that I am extraparochial, & will not submit to the assessment & to bid them distress me at their peril', he wrote defiantly to his attorney in 1775.⁴

One reason for the neglect is that in terms of the history of the Church of England, Cornwallis has been almost completely overshadowed by two of his eighteenth-century predecessors. William Wake, who was archbishop from 1716 to 1737, has been the subject of an influential two-volume biography by Norman Sykes, published in 1957.⁵ Moreover, Cornwallis's immediate predecessor, Thomas Secker, archbishop from 1758 to 1768, was not only an experienced churchman, having served as bishop of Bristol and Oxford, but also an active and significant politician. Cornwallis himself was well aware of Secker's reputation; in his first visitation 'Charge' to his diocesan clergy in 1770 he referred to Secker as 'my incomparable predecessor, whose extensive erudition and uncommon abilities were exerted in your services'.⁶ Secker was a dominating personality and an impressive, if sometimes divisive, ecclesiastical leader, prominent in public debate. He created and bequeathed an immense documentary record of his activities as archbishop, which has been thoroughly exploited by historians. His *Speculum* has been superbly edited by Jeremy Gregory for the Church of England Record Society; his *Autobiography* has been in print for more than twenty years, and there is a considerable quantity of surviving correspondence between Secker and leading politicians and clerics. In 2007, Robert Ingram drew upon this material to produce a highly scholarly and detailed biography of this distinguished archbishop. The legacy of Secker has made it extremely difficult to avoid viewing the mid eighteenth-century Church of England, and the diocese of Canterbury in particular, through Secker's eyes, and Cornwallis does not rate a single mention in Professor Ingram's book.⁷

In comparison, Cornwallis's archival legacy is far thinner, consisting of four volumes at Lambeth Palace Library, his Episcopal Register, and scattered letters in the papers of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, together with correspondence with his patrons, the Duke of Newcastle and the Earl of Hardwicke, which pre-date his years at Canterbury. This relative deficiency can be explained in part by the paralytic stroke which Cornwallis suffered while an undergraduate at Cambridge; his university contemporary, the poet Thomas Gray, noted in 1738 that Cornwallis's appearance was 'sadly altered, so that one can very hardly know him'.⁸ This stroke deprived Cornwallis of the use of his right hand, and to judge from the appearance of his left-handed writing thereafter, the exercise was difficult for him even during his later years. Although Thomas Newton, Bishop of Bristol and Cornwallis's successor as Dean of St Paul's, tells us that he otherwise 'enjoyed uncommon good

health, and never fails in his attendance upon the multifarious business of his station',⁹ in old age, especially from about 1780, Cornwallis was a near-invalid, and, of course, clerical (and especially episcopal) retirement in this period was virtually unknown. In December 1780, Horace Walpole wrote 'My Lord of Canterbury is not extreme, but very tottering', and on 6 June 1782 Cornwallis was prevented by gout from making the customary speech on George III's birthday.¹⁰

What then can we say about Cornwallis as Archbishop? What is perhaps most immediately striking is that he was by far the most aristocratic of the eighteenth-century archbishops of Canterbury. The contrast between his background and that of Secker, who was educated at a Dissenting academy, and at Leiden, and who was intended originally for the medical profession, was marked indeed. Archbishop Cornwallis's father was Charles, fourth baron Cornwallis (1675-1722); his mother was the daughter of the Earl of Arran in the Irish peerage. His twin brother was the military commander General Edward Cornwallis, Lieutenant-Governor of Nova Scotia and Governor of Gibraltar. His nephew was the military commander Charles, Marquis Cornwallis, famous for his capitulation at Yorktown in 1781, who was Viceroy of Ireland from 1798 to 1801 and twice Governor-General of Bengal. Another nephew was James Cornwallis, who became Dean of Canterbury 1775 and six years later bishop of Lichfield, which diocese he retained until his death in 1824; and he inherited the Cornwallis earldom in 1823. Another brother and two nephews were Members of the House of Commons before or during his primacy. Archbishop Cornwallis's career offers some support to Professor John Cannon's contention that the aristocracy was tightening its grip on the senior positions in Church and state in the late eighteenth century.¹¹ So does Cornwallis's marriage to Caroline, daughter of William Townshend, the third son of Charles, second Viscount Townshend; she was the grand-daughter of the prime minister Sir Robert Walpole's brother-in-law Viscount (Turnip)Townshend, a point to be borne in mind when we cite Horace Walpole as a source generally sympathetic to Cornwallis. Caroline's first cousin was Thomas Townshend, from 1789 Viscount Sydney, the home secretary under Shelburne and Pitt the Younger. Caroline Cornwallis, moreover, acquired a reputation for learning; according to the diary of Joseph Price of Brabourne, 'She learned Latin and Greek with her brother Charles, and did exercises with him. Better than he'.¹² Richard Watson, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge and subsequently Bishop of Llandaff, paid a back-handed compliment to Caroline Cornwallis's authority when he reminisced of the archbishop that 'he was so wife-ridden, I have no opinion of his politics'.¹³ There are Lives of the Archbishops of Canterbury; perhaps we need the Wives of the Archbishops as well.

Although these connections help to explain the nomination of Corn-

wallis as Archbishop of Canterbury by George III in August 1768, his appointment nonetheless caused general surprise to contemporaries. Charles Godwin (d.1770), fellow of Balliol College, Oxford, informed John Hutchins, the historian of Dorset, on 15 August 1768, 'He himself is a person quite unexpected'.¹⁴ Andrew Ducarel, the keeper of Lambeth Palace Library, wrote to his friend Thomas Loveday on 14 September 1768: 'He was fixed upon above, he came, no man was ever more surprised at the event than himself'.¹⁵ Horace Walpole was also surprised – in his case, pleasantly so; he wrote to George Montagu: 'I am sure you are not sorry that Cornwallis is Archbishop. He is no hypocrite, time-server, nor high priest. I little expected so good a choice'.¹⁶ Admittedly, to be admired by the sceptical Walpole can hardly be counted as evidence of evangelistic zeal, but Walpole was always quick to detect false piety in the conduct and demeanour of prelates, so his testimony may be regarded as evidence in Cornwallis's favour.

Cornwallis was indeed 'fixed upon above'. We know that George III's first choice as archbishop had been John Thomas, Bishop of Winchester. On his declining the honour, the Duke of Grafton, prime minister from 1768 to 1770, seized the opportunity to nominate Cornwallis, with whom he had developed a personal friendship, through Cornwallis's twin brother, the army commander Edward Cornwallis.¹⁷ The connection continued; Caroline Cornwallis was reported to have been present at Grafton's installation as Chancellor of Cambridge University in 1769 where – not surprisingly – it was reported that she could 'understand perfectly well' the Latin speeches.¹⁸ Within three months of his installation, Cornwallis repaid the debt by appointing Grafton's client, John Hinchliffe, as one of his chaplains. The arch-Latitudinarian Hinchliffe quickly received further promotion from Grafton, who elevated him to the bishopric of Peterborough the following year. In 1770, the diarist and man about town Sylas Neville heard from Thomas Deverson, collector of the salt duties, that when his friends solicited an office for him, they were 'asked by the Duke of Grafton & (which is more surprising) by the Archbishop of Canterbury – 'has he a vote in any corporation etc? Church & State are equally corrupt'.¹⁹ Admittedly, the radical Neville was willing to believe anything ill of Church and State. But the political connection between Grafton and Cornwallis, cemented by patronage, continued until they parted company over the American war, of which the former prime minister became a critic in the later 1770s.

Although Cornwallis's aristocratic connections clearly served him well, they were combined with a career record of unimpeachable worthiness. His ascent of the ladder of preferment was smooth and predictable, although, as is evident from his correspondence with the Duke of Newcastle, the ecclesiastical minister in the Whig ministry of George II's reign, not as rapid as he himself would have wished. He became a fellow of his college

(Christ's, Cambridge) soon after graduation, received a Cambridge D.D., and was rector of two livings in Norfolk and Suffolk, where he acquired experience as a (not always resident) parish priest. He positioned himself strategically for the attention of the court of George II by becoming a canon of Windsor and one of the chaplains to the King. Hence his nomination to the bishopric of Lichfield and Coventry in 1750 seemed a natural progression, as did the highly rewarding addition of the Deanery of St Paul's in 1766, a perquisite which he resigned on his translation to Canterbury. The impression of worthiness was reinforced by the opinions of his acquaintances. Thomas Chapman, fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge, at the same time as Cornwallis, and subsequently vicar of Elham, noted 'Archbishop Cornwallis was a studious man at Cambridge, much less scandalous. Always consistent, honest and beloved'.²⁰ This verdict was reinforced by Horace Walpole, who wrote to Sir Horace Mann on 13 August 1768, 'Bishop Cornwallis is our new Archbishop; a quiet, amiable, good sort of man; without the hypocrisy of his predecessor or the abject soul of most of his brethren'.²¹

But, as with several other eighteenth-century archbishops, Cornwallis left only a faint footprint in Canterbury itself. His enthronement at the Cathedral on 6 October 1768 was conducted by proxy, although that was not unusual in the eighteenth century; Thomas Herring (1747) was enthroned by proxy, as was Cornwallis's successor, John Moore. Every bishop of Rochester in the eighteenth century – and indeed every bishop of Rochester from the time of Thomas Spratt in 1684 onwards – was enthroned by proxy. The archbishop's palace, virtually destroyed in the aftermath of the Civil War, remained uninhabitable in Cornwallis's time; indeed, Gostling in 1774 noted 'After so much destruction and so many alterations as have happened here, it is hardly possible to form any conjecture of what this palace has been'.²² Hence, in common with other eighteenth-century archbishops, he made his base at Lambeth. Even before the Civil War, archbishops did not live in Canterbury – even William Laud had not done so.²³ Nor did Cornwallis ever occupy the palace at Croydon, which was falling into disuse (although Secker was still paying for its furniture) and which was sold in 1780. During the Canterbury phase of his visitations, according to Eliza Berkeley in the introduction to her son's poems, he lodged at the deanery, although the itinerary for his 1778 and 1782 visitations states that he stayed at the famous coaching house, the *Fountain Inn* (St Margaret's Street).²⁴ And it was customary for the institutions of incumbents to parochial livings in the diocese to be performed by the Vicar-General, Peter Calvert (and from 1778 William Wynne). This did not go without contemporary criticism. Edward Hasted wrote on 10 July 1770: 'We are likely to be very thin of Prebendaries here. Dr Benson will be the only Resident left here. Sure

such an Endowment as Canterbury requires a little more attention'. The following February he took his critique further:

Our Church is quite neglected by its Members of every degree, beyond the example of what has been heretofore. When such things raise blushes and indignation in a Layman, what must or ought those to feel, who, by their neglect, either occasion, or do not by their authority prevent, such scandalous impieties? Neither Dean Potter, nor Archbishop Secker, under both whom this Church flourished with much luster, and in the greatest order and discipline, would have suffered it. It is an unpleasant reflection, that the characters of the dead must be established at the expence of the living.²⁵

So we have to ask how active was Cornwallis in the diocese? Unlike some of his predecessors, including Laud, he did not regard Canterbury as an experiment or model for diocesan practice elsewhere in the country, nor did he intend to pursue a specific agenda. He perceived his role to be that of an administrator, whose overriding duty was the maintenance of clerical standards, the preservation of the Church's patrimony and the promotion of the intellectual defence of the established Church against its critics: or, as the Dean and Chapter put it, in a letter to him immediately after his enthronement, 'The Cause of Religion, the Honor of our Profession, and the Comfort of the Clergy'.²⁶ A further sign of the shadow of Secker is the way in which Cornwallis – and his own successor as archbishop, John Moore – used and annotated Secker's 'Speculum' in conducting their own visitations of the diocese.²⁷ The density of its (reasonably) up to date detail probably explains why Cornwallis did not deem it necessary to compile one himself. On the other hand, Cornwallis conducted all his four visitations – 1770, 1774, 1778 and 1782 – in person, whereas Secker was obliged to cancel his second visitation (1762) because of ill-health, and to depute the task to the assisting bishop and the vicar-general. Cornwallis's visitations took place in the first half of July, after the close of the parliamentary session when attendance in the House of Lords was no longer necessary, and lasted for between two and three weeks. His regular itinerary followed that recommended to Archbishop Wake in 1716. He would begin with confirmations at Sittingbourne, and at Faversham, then would spend four days at Canterbury where he visited the Dean and Chapter, conducted confirmations in the Cathedral, entertained the City Corporation (on quite a generous scale), and usually took a day's rest. Then he would proceed to Ashford, Ramsgate (the *King's Head*), Sandwich (the *Old Bell Inn*), Dover, Hythe (the *White Hart Inn*), Romney, Cranbrook, Maidstone, and back to Lambeth. On his last visitation, in 1782, he overcame 'the badness of the roads' and added Tenterden (the *Woolpack Inn*) to his route. In 1778 he recorded that he performed 7,478 confirmations, 2,060 of them in Canterbury; this was

a standard figure for the period.²⁸ Local evidence suggests that he was generally well received, although one incident during his third visitation in 1778 was probably untypical. The *Gentleman's Magazine* reported:

During his stay at Dover, at the London Tavern, the Archbishop and his Lady were much alarmed at midnight by the door of their chamber being burst open by a drunken English Squire just arrived from France, who insisted on taking possession of their apartment, which his Grace, for peace sake, resigned. Next morning, when sober, he offered to make submission but his Grace would not see him.²⁹

On 5 July 1778 Cornwallis preached (although he did not publish) a charity sermon at Canterbury Cathedral, a rather rare example of his preaching there. But he followed Secker's example by visiting his peculiars – parishes in other dioceses which fell under his jurisdiction. Quite full records survive of his visitation of the deaneries of Pagham and Tering in Sussex, in July 1776, from which there is also the fullest surviving list of his expenses (including turnpikes £2 11s. 6d.; barber's bill at Sevenoaks and Lewes 10s.; Ringers £3 3s. 0d.).³⁰

This account points to the conclusion that Cornwallis carried out his visitational duties conscientiously and to the letter, but in a rather routine way. Might the same be said about his exercise of patronage within his diocese? For in the diocese of Canterbury, seventy-two out of the 279 parishes were in the gift of the archbishop – a much higher proportion than that which pertained in many dioceses.³¹ Three of the twelve prebendaries of the Cathedral (the first, fourth and sixth stalls) were also in the archbishop's gift, although none of them was vacated during Cornwallis's primacy. However, he did have the opportunity to nominate three Six Preachers, of whom the most notable was Osmond Beauvoir, the headmaster of the King's School, in 1773.³² The Six preachers fulfilled many of the preaching duties of the Cathedral in the 1770s and several of them, including George Berkeley, resided in the Cathedral precincts. Those who, by contrast, resided in their parishes were sufficiently aggrieved by the ruling of the Dean and Chapter in 1775 that they would be held responsible for the repair of the houses assigned to them in the Precincts unless they actually resided in them that they appealed to Cornwallis for support.³³ But it was in the parishes that an archbishop's patronage could be most influentially exercised. Cornwallis certainly used his to the advantage of his family. Upon his nephew James Cornwallis he conferred the rectories of Ickham and of Adisham; in 1773 he added the rectory of Boughton Malherbe; and subsequently he granted him a dispensation to hold Wrotham in conjunction with Ickham and the chapel of Staple. William Cornwallis, vicar of Elham, was a relative and a Cambridge connection. This of itself was not unusual in the eighteenth century (and later); Secker had collated several of his nephews to livings

in the diocese. Also far from unusual was the pattern of nominations based on political connection, of which a spectacular example can be cited from October 1770, when, on the death of Dean John Potter, Cornwallis gave the rich and much coveted vicarage of Lydd to Brownlow North, the half-brother of the prime minister, who in the same month succeeded to Potter's deanship. Otherwise, generalisations have to be advanced only cautiously; just under one third of the parishes within the archbishop's patronage fell vacant during Cornwallis's tenure. His emphasis on learning helped to accelerate the tendency, already evident by mid-century, whereby clergy in the diocese of Canterbury were graduates, and whereby an increasing proportion of them were published authors. There are signs, too, that where possible he appointed clergy who had connections with the diocese, or at least with the county. In an example which combined these aspirations, in January 1770 he collated to the rectory of Saltwood and the chapel of Hythe annexed to it to Thomas Randolph, a product of the King's School, Canterbury, who had married into the Honeywood family and was subsequently Master of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Cornwallis himself published only four separate sermons – the same number as his successor John Moore. He demonstrated, however, a sustained interest in the promotion of learning, of which the best surviving evidence may be found in the gifts to Lambeth Palace Library, including a sixty-volume collection of sixteenth and seventeenth-century tracts, made by him and, after his death, by his wife.³⁴ And he went to considerable trouble to fill gaps in the series of portraits of previous archbishops at Lambeth – evidence of his respect for his predecessors, and his appreciation of the historical importance of his office.

The most important channels of communication and the means of liaison between archbishop and diocese were Cornwallis's chaplains. They included men with detailed local knowledge, such as William Backhouse, archdeacon of Canterbury and Master of the Eastbridge Hospital; the scholarly antiquarian Michael Lort, who became librarian to Lambeth Palace in 1785; and William Vyse, Rector of Lambeth, whose career reminds us of the important charitable role exercised by the archbishop. Cornwallis was President of the Corporation of the Sons of the Clergy, a governor of the Charterhouse and the Vice-President of St George's Hospital. It was through Vyse, for example, that Dr Johnson applied successfully to Cornwallis for a place at the Charterhouse for his indigent friend Isaac De Groot, in 1777.³⁵ And in 1770, at the time of his primary visitation, Cornwallis demanded details of the financial management of St John's Hospital, Northgate, and of the Harbledown Hospital. One of his principal concerns was the possible encroachment of other lessees upon hospital land. As Jeremy Gregory has shown, Cornwallis like his predecessors, paid particular attention to the hospitals in the diocese, and as a result their buildings were maintained and they discharged their

historic function of providing for the indigent and aged.³⁶ Perhaps John Nichols, in his famous *Literary Anecdotes*, was not exaggerating when he described Cornwallis as ‘this benevolent prelate.’³⁷ It was to a large extent through the careful researches and recommendations of his chaplains that he acceded to, or rejected, requests for dispensations for non-residence and the holding of more than one living. During his primacy, after what was clearly a thorough investigation in which his chaplains played a considerable part, Cornwallis agreed, on petition from their patrons and/or incumbents, to three applications for the consolidation of parishes. They were the rectory of Cheriton and vicarage of Newington in 1770; of Badlesmere and Leaveland in 1773; and the vicarage of Brabourne and the rectory of Monks Horton in 1777.³⁸

Conscientious management, however, could be, and was, represented, or mis-represented in the late eighteenth, and much more in the nineteenth, century as a lack of interest in reform. But even the agenda of ‘orthodox church reform’ credited to Archbishop Secker in Robert Ingram’s biography, was essentially restorative in intention and meant in practice little more than the clamping down on abuses and a reinforcement of clerical discipline, rather than the redistribution of clerical wealth or any challenge to the property rights of lay patrons.³⁹ Cornwallis himself, although willing to listen to proposals for change, for example in liturgical matters, remained mistrustful of innovation in church and state, and in a sermon preached in 1756, while he was Bishop of Lichfield, he expressed a view which neatly summarised the conventions of his age:

The Apostles had no instruction from Christ to cause any Innovation in Government, or to unsettle the Laws of the People they were to preach to. On the contrary, whoever embraced their Doctrine were to *render to Caesar the Things that were Caesars’s*, and to pay Obedience to the Powers that were established in the World.⁴⁰

He perceived his role in the House of Lords as necessitating the defence of church interests; in a relatively rare intervention on a secular matter, he encouraged his fellow-bishops to vote against the Contractors Bill, a modest item of economical reform supported by the Rockingham administration, in April 1782.⁴¹ Where he showed a real disposition to take a lead was in the upholding of what he perceived as public morality. With what was probably uncharacteristic vehemence, he denounced the Manchester Playhouse Bill in 1775 citing a visit to Birmingham during his years as Bishop of Lichfield as evidence of the tendency of theatres to add to the danger of promoting idleness ‘among those who are destined to live by labour and industry’ already posed by taverns.⁴² Any impulses for reform within the Church were in any case forestalled by the American war and the need, as we shall see, for Cornwallis to focus upon the plight

of the American Episcopalian clergy. And by the time Richard Watson produced his scheme, in the form of a letter to the archbishop in August 1782, recommending a re-disposition of the Church's revenues, by which the bishoprics should be rendered equal to each other in value, and the smaller livings to be subsidised by a proportionate deduction from the richer endowments, Cornwallis was already ailing.⁴³

But Cornwallis also understood his public role as one which represented the Church and his diocese in relations with non-Anglicans. It is noteworthy that he, unlike many of his fellow-clergy, as well as radical critics of the Church, did not share the widespread anxiety – indeed paranoia – about alleged increases in Catholic numbers in the diocese of Canterbury or in England as a whole, which characterised the late 1760s and early 1770s and were redolent of older-type fears of Popery. He was widely reported as denying that their numbers were increasing, or that there was any sort of problem, or that renewed penal laws were necessary. In May 1775 he voted against Lord Camden's motion in the House of Lords for the repeal of the Quebec Act of 1774, denying that the Protestant religion was neglected or endangered in Canada and declaring that:

Four clergymen of the Church of England were actually established in that province, with a stipend of £200 per annum each; that more would be appointed, as soon as the necessity of the case, or an increase of population should require it; and [he] denied that the popish religion was established in Canada, or that it was possible for parliament to have acted otherwise, consistent with the faith of the capitulation, or the terms of the definitive treaty [of 1763].⁴⁴

While firmly identifying himself with the Anglican project in Canada, he approved strongly of the measures for toleration and a measure of civil participation for Francophone Catholics in Quebec, and, largely as a result of his contribution to the debate, only one bishop (Jonathan Shipley of St Asaph, a supporter of William Pitt the Elder, Earl of Chatham) voted for its repeal. In the immediate aftermath of the 'No Popery' Gordon Riots of June 1780, when Lambeth Palace had been in some danger, Cornwallis resisted attempts to reintroduce harsher anti-Catholic measures and spoke strongly against the Bill for the Security of the Protestant Religion in words which encapsulate his essential moderation:

The first and most respectable tenet in the Christian system was humanity, and it never could consist with that virtue to compel a man into a mode of worship against his conscience and belief. The Act of the 3rd of William and Mary, against the Roman Catholics [1692], he had always considered as very severe, and adapted only to the circumstances of the nation at that time; and it was with a view to relieve persons professing that religion from the very great hardships they might suffer under that and other Acts inflicting pains and penalties, that he had consented to the Bill for

repealing them [i.e. the Catholic Relief Act of 1778, which was the trigger for the Gordon Riots].⁴⁵

In 1781 he appointed as one of his chaplains James Smith, an ex-Catholic priest who had conformed to the Church of England and had been promoted by Secker, to be the master of Eastbridge Hospital, Canterbury, in 1765.⁴⁶ Such indeed was his sympathy with the Catholic minority in Britain that Horace Walpole quipped in 1780, ‘When we have Cardinals, I suppose they will be protectors of different nations as at Rome: Cardinal Hurd of the Duke of Mecklenburgh and Cardinal Cornwallis of the Pope’.⁴⁷ Cornwallis shared, however, the conventional suspicion of Methodism. When approached by the Countess of Huntingdon in 1777 for a relaxation of the practice whereby many bishops had rejected for ordination candidates from her college at Trevecca, his negative reply, for all its polished urbanity, was decisive.⁴⁸

So, in conclusion, much recently published research on the eighteenth-century Church of England has tended to highlight its more propitious qualities, and to modify or dismiss the familiar Victorian representations of pastoral indifference, self-interestedness and lack of spirituality. One thinks of Jeremy Gregory’s authoritative study of this diocese, W.M. Jacob’s sympathetic re-assessment of the clerical profession in England, and the essays in *The Church of England c.1689-c.1813. From Toleration to Tractarianism*.⁴⁹ Similarly, William Gibson has depicted the Church as characterised, in his words, by ‘Unity and Accord’.⁵⁰ If this approach conveys an impression of cautious optimism, then perhaps the leadership of Cornwallis would remind us to emphasize the caution as well as the optimism. But before re-consigning Cornwallis, as it were, to the abyss of neglect, this article suggests three mitigating factors which taken together amount to a rather more positive verdict upon this final decade and a half of his lengthy clerical career.

Firstly, we have noted that Cornwallis’s archiepiscopate coincided exactly with the military and naval disasters of the American War, as what started as a colonial rebellion became a world-wide conflict in which Britain had no European ally. The scale of the disaster was brought home by the serious prospect of a Franco-Spanish invasion of southern England in 1779-1780; at the St Catherine’s Chapter in 1781 the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury agreed that troops should be allowed to drill in the Cathedral precincts.⁵¹ For Cornwallis it also signified a crisis for the American Episcopalian clergy, most of whom were Loyalists in sympathy and who suffered confiscation, in a few cases imprisonment and in several hundred cases exile, through their allegiance to the King and their adherence to the Church. This international crisis for Anglicanism occupied an increasing proportion of Cornwallis’s time and is quite

heavily represented in the slender collection of his papers – one volume of which consists of lists of subscribers to the fund established by the Church in 1776 for the exiled Episcopalian clergy, and of disbursements from that fund to some of those exiled.⁵²

Cornwallis generally supported the American policy of North's administration; but, as Nigel Aston puts it, he was one of the 'quiet', rather than the militant, supporters of North's use of force against the colonists.⁵³ The archbishop regretted that he had to part political company with the Duke of Grafton, who resigned as Lord Privy Seal in November 1775, and who still at that time described Cornwallis as his 'friend'.⁵⁴ He was far more restrained in attacking the American revolutionaries than, for example, was William Markham, Archbishop of York, or, indeed, than the vociferous High Churchman George Horne, who on the nomination of George III and Lord North, became Dean of Canterbury in 1781. The bishops as a body were subsequently criticized for supporting the government, but it should be appreciated that they did so with different degrees of emphasis. John Wesley, admittedly an advocate of North's policy, believed that much of that criticism when directed at Cornwallis personally was grossly overstated, adding ironically that 'A skilful painter may easily ... by a little colouring make Lord North the very picture of Lord Strafford and Archbishop Cornwallis of Archbishop Laud.'⁵⁵

Cornwallis's hostility to the American rebellion is to a large extent explained by the mounting evidence, repeated in numerous individual cases, of the harsh fate of many of the American Episcopalians at the hands of the victorious patriots. He led his episcopal brethren in promoting contributions to the fund for the relief of the exiled clergy; a total of £6,684 was raised in 1776-7. Cornwallis and the Dean and Chapter took the lead in subscribing: and the clergy of Canterbury diocese appear in quite disproportionately high numbers in the published list of subscribers.⁵⁶ It is clear that during these years Cornwallis was very much involved with the work of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, of which he was president, and which was responsible for the appointment and welfare of many of the Episcopalian clergy in the colonies. He worked closely with the layman William Stevens and the exiled clergyman Jonathan Boucher in the small inner committee of the SPG. Through Cornwallis's influence, Stevens was appointed in 1782 to the post of Treasurer of Queen Anne's Bounty, a post which brought him closer to the bishops who met at the Bounty Offices in Dean's Yard during the abeyance of Convocation. Cornwallis had to deal with many applications for grants from the fund for the Episcopalians, many of them distressing cases; some two hundred grants such grants are listed in his papers, and where he could, Cornwallis tried to find livings for these exiled clergymen.⁵⁷ One unnoticed result of this endeavour was the series of Acts passed in the 1780s appointing commissioners to examine the claims of dispossessed Loyalists (many of

them clergy) and to grant compensation in deserving cases. This aspect of Cornwallis's primacy tends to be rather overlooked, partly because it was relatively inconspicuous, and partly because History does not on the whole like losers. His concern for the Church overseas was evident, too, in his contribution of one hundred pounds to a fund for rebuilding churches in Barbados; he was by far the highest individual subscriber.⁵⁸

Our second conclusion is that if, as Brian Young proposes, Latitudinarianism can be convicted of complacency, it also, especially as understood by Cornwallis, had much more positive aspects. His formative years had been nurtured by the Court Whig tradition, personified by the Duke of Newcastle, a devout churchman whose domestic life was marked by family prayers, and by the Church Whig tradition of Archbishop Wake and Bishop Edmund Gibson of London. For them, the protection of the interests of the Church had always been a higher priority than the immediate partisan interests of a Whig administration. But Cornwallis also imbibed some of the historic legacy of libertarian Whiggism, as we have seen in his views on toleration. He was no high churchman; his nephew Earl Cornwallis (Grafton's friend) even took part in an aristocratic protest march to the Tower of London in 1763, to complain about the arrest of John Wilkes on a general warrant.⁵⁹ His first loyalty was to Newcastle, from whom he had expected – indeed demanded – preferment in the 1750s. And as Horace Walpole noted, he was the only bishop to attend Newcastle's last levee after the latter's removal from office by George III in 1762. 'As I suppose all bishops are prophets', wrote Walpole, 'they foresee that he [Newcastle] will never come into place again, for there was but one who had the decency to take leave of him, after crowding his rooms for forty years together; it was Cornwallis'.⁶⁰

And Cornwallis, unlike Secker, was no disciplinarian over allegations of doctrinal unorthodoxy. Where Secker over-awed, Cornwallis's instincts were conciliatory. Secker's approach was confrontational (as with his carpeting of the proto-Socinian Peter Peckard);⁶¹ Cornwallis's tone was much more emollient. His reception of the clerical advocates of changes to the liturgy in the early 1770s, though non-committal, was friendly and not obstructive; Grafton described it as 'gracious'.⁶² He voted against relief bills for Dissenting ministers and schoolmasters in 1772 and 1773, but accepted a modified relief bill, which passed into law, in 1779. His attitude helped to conciliate Dissenters – particularly orthodox Dissenters – and, more importantly, to keep Latitudinarians, worried about the dangers, as they saw them, of a high church, authoritarian revival evident in Horne's appointment as Dean of Canterbury, within the Church and contributing positively to the maintenance of its structures. But this attitude should not be interpreted as the soft line, the line of least resistance. He was well aware that sympathy on his part with the reform of the liturgy and of the Articles, urged by such as Francis Blackburne, John Jebb and Francis

Wollaston, would provoke exactly the hostile reaction of Evangelicalism and High Church Orthodoxy to which Brian Young referred. And the preservation of orthodoxy, especially over the doctrine of the Trinity, was of paramount importance. Significantly, Cornwallis had been opposed in Cambridge (where he came near to being elected as Master of Christ's) by the Socinian Edmund Law and by the extremely heterodox Thomas Thompson, subsequently vicar of Elham; according to Joseph Price of Brabourne, Thompson was 'half a dissenter owing to having been in America'.⁶³ Although only eight parish clergymen in Kent are recorded as signatories to the *Feathers Tavern* petition of 1772, which demanded the abolition of the compulsory subscription to the thirty-nine articles for clergy and university students, others in the county, including Thomas Thompson and John Conant, rector of Hastingleigh, were sympathetic towards it.⁶⁴

At the same time, and for the same reasons, Cornwallis played a substantial part in the long-term process of reconciling those clergymen from Tory backgrounds to the Georgian Church, a matter of considerable importance in Kent where, as the researches of Valerie Smith have demonstrated, the high church and non-juring traditions were strong and vocal.⁶⁵ Although not aggressive towards doctrinal heterodoxy, he allowed it no influence in his use of preferment or patronage. Here he was greatly assisted by the challenge to order at home and abroad posed by the American Revolution, a challenge to which Tory and Church Whig clergy could unite in response. By accomplishing the dual and at first glance contradictory task of conciliating the more liberal-minded Latitudinarians, and assuring those of a Tory disposition that he would defend ecclesiastical order, he bequeathed to his successor a relatively united Church at diocesan and, more broadly, at national level. The value of this bequest quickly became apparent in the French Revolutionary period when the loyalty of the clergy was an important contributory factor to the 'relative quiescence' in the county of Kent during the French Revolutionary period.⁶⁶ Just as the Duke of Newcastle had, with Henry Pelham, presided over the inclusive 'broad-bottom' administration in the 1740s and early 1750s, and had been a key figure in one of the most broadly based ministries of the entire century – the Pitt-Newcastle coalition administration of 1757-1761 – so the instincts of Cornwallis were those of a conciliator and a unifier.

Thirdly and finally, virtually everyone who encountered Cornwallis personally in the diocese of Canterbury was greatly impressed by his extraordinary courtesy, particularly towards his diocesan clergy. Contemporary descriptions of his visitations repeatedly deployed the expressions 'elegant' and 'genteel'. On 20 July 1770, he 'confirmed at New Romney and gave an elegant dinner to the Clergy and neighbouring Gentlemen'.⁶⁷ On his arrival in Canterbury in July 1778 and in July 1778

he is reported to have accepted the invitation of the Mayor and Aldermen of the city to the Guildhall 'in the most genteel manner', when he was presented with 'a most elegant Desert'.⁶⁸ The response of John Denne, perpetual curate of Maidstone, to Cornwallis's elevation to Canterbury was 'We have now got what we wanted – a gentleman'.⁶⁹ Thomas Newton, Bishop of Bristol, who succeeded Cornwallis as Dean of St Paul's in 1768 noted:

He keeps a hospitable and elegant table, has not a grain of pride in his composition, is easy of access, receives every one with affability and good nature, is courteous, obliging, condescending, and as a proof of it, he has not often been made the subject of censure even in this censorious age.⁷⁰

At his primary visitation in 1770, Edward Hasted was quick to note Cornwallis's friendliness:

The Archbishop gives great satisfaction to every body here: his affability and courteous behaviour is much taken note of, as very different from his Predecessors. I have been introduced to him, and had a considerable chat with him.⁷¹

A letter from 'A Kentish Vicar', who, we now know, was Samuel Denne, published in *Gentleman's Magazine* on Cornwallis's death, went further:

The courtesy with which he received those who had occasion to approach him was not the affected politeness of a court. It was the courtesy of religion and morality. It was the evident result of a good understanding and a consummately benevolent heart.⁷²

One would make allowance for the ingratiating behaviour and tone often adopted towards superiors and patrons – but nonetheless there is ample evidence that Cornwallis was personally popular with his clergy, that is to say, with those junior to him in the Church. Samuel Denne added:

At Lambeth-house from the instant that he entered its walls, that odious distinction of a separate table for the Chaplains was abolished. It remained for an Archbishop of high birth to declare that they should be constantly seated at the same board with himself. His board, upon public days, was princely. His hospitality was, in general, as noble as his own moderation in the enjoyment of it was exemplary.⁷³

Hasted made the same point in almost identical phraseology. He, too, noted that 'it remained for *an archbishop of Dr. Cornwallis's noble birth* to declare, that *they should be seated at the same table with himself*, where his *hospitality*, as well on his *public days*, as at other times, was *as noble*, as *his own moderation* in the enjoyment of it was exemplary'.⁷⁴

This was much more, however, than an instance of *noblesse oblige*. For Cornwallis's eirencism and his manner of pursuing it amounted, in effect, to an excellent instance in practice of that late eighteenth-century culture of 'politeness' which has recently become a fashionable area of academic research. In this sense, 'politeness' included the ability to create the type of public and private space in which distinctions of birth, upbringing, rank and hierarchy could be suspended in the spirit of inclusiveness, and in which, as Paul Langford puts it, conflicting purposes could be reconciled or concealed, while not undermining the fundamentals of power relationships.⁷⁵ Politeness involved 'an avoidance of constrained and ceremony, in favour of ease and informality'.⁷⁶ Joseph Price of Brabourne quoted Cornwallis, during his first visitation in July 1770 as hoping that 'his reverend brethren would tolerate his informalities and accept with candor his attempts to be useful to them'.⁷⁷ In 1783 the obituary in the *Kentish Gazette* drew particular attention to this characteristic of the late archbishop: 'In affability, candour, and hospitality, none of his Predecessors have exceeded – may none of his Successors fall short of him'.⁷⁸

Cornwallis did indeed move with 'ease and informality' among his own clergy in a way which even permitted a hint of familiarity. As we have seen, Hasted used the word 'chat', rather than 'conversation' in this context. Much of what has been written about eighteenth-century 'politeness' has viewed it as almost entirely secular in origin and application, belonging principally to the world of the coffee house and assembly room. But it also had its religious dimension. For much of the broader significance of Cornwallis's courtesy and sociability is evident in the relatively harmonious relations between the higher and lower clergy in his diocese and late eighteenth-century England. There was nothing remotely to compare with the phenomenon in France known as *Richérisme*, the view that spiritual authority and in the Church was most appropriately exercised on an equal basis by all the clergy, and not confined to Pope or bishops. The later eighteenth-century Gallican Church was torn by the politically volatile resentment of the impoverised parish priests at the wealth and the authoritarianism of their ecclesiastical superiors. It is difficult to imagine a Cornwallis responding as did the Bishop of Luçon, who, when elected along with a group of humble *curés* to the First Estate on the summoning of the States-General in 1789, declared 'It is not without repugnance that I accept this commission'.⁷⁹ That might have been an extreme case, and perhaps there is the danger of over-dramatisation. But at Versailles, barely six years after Cornwallis's death, some of the poorer and most embittered and the most alienated of the parish priests in the First Estate of the States-General took the lead in voting to join the Third Estate to form what became the National Assembly. There were dramatic and long-lasting consequences, not least

for the Gallican Church itself – consequences from which, across the Channel, the relatively integrated clergy of the Church of England played a considerable part in warding off. Few historians, seeking to explain the British avoidance of revolution in the 1790s, would cite the role of Archbishop Cornwallis. But an established Church which was able to contain, and for the most part conciliate, the variety of opinions among its clergy and to retain the adherence of a high proportion of the laity, thereby possessed an underlying commitment to the regime, which proved to be a powerful anti-revolutionary force in Britain. If not its creator, Cornwallis carries much of the responsibility for its enhancement and its durability.

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