

THE CONTRIBUTION OF SYDNEY SMITH

THE Anglican episcopate in the House of Lords cut a sorry figure in the debates on Catholic Emancipation. To the last the bishops of the established Church resisted by vote and speech every proposal that would, as the Bishop of Bangor put it in 1808, place Catholics 'on an equal footing with Protestants'; or, as the Bishop of Lincoln declared in 1828, 'endanger the Protestant Establishment.' Nor was the high churchmanship of the ancient university of Oxford more favourable to the civil rights of Catholics. John Henry Newman himself signed the petition against Catholic Emancipation—there were many of these petitions—and the university unseated Peel when he appealed to the electorate in 1829 as a supporter of Catholic claims.

But one distinguished clergyman of the Church of England, Sydney Smith, Canon of St. Paul's, did most consistently and whole-heartedly champion the Catholic cause. With wit and humour, with knowledge and, above all, with a sincerity that lifted the argument above mere advocacy, Sydney Smith strove year after year for the accomplishment of justice. And he wrote so well that *The Letters of Peter Plymley* and the articles in *The Edinburgh Review* are capital reading to-day. A forceful writer, thoroughly well informed of his subject, sure of his ground and equally sure of the mentality of the people he addressed, Sydney Smith struck as skilfully and as fearlessly as Cobbett did at iniquity. A true whig, with vital convictions that held him steadfast and were no mere opinions to be worn or discarded at pleasure, with a rich sense of the ridiculous that poked fun at the pompous intolerance of persons in high places, he warns and pleads, now solemnly, now lightly. He

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routs out the old musty prejudice of the 'no popery' man, arranges and classifies his opponents and applies a neat and appropriate label to each set of antagonists—the 'no-popery fools,' the 'no-popery rogues,' the 'honest no-popery people,' and the simply 'base.' If he can do nothing else—and for more than thirty years he pegs away in the good cause, a friend of Ireland to the last—Sydney Smith can at least divide and disturb the enemy, shake the complacency of pious Protestants, expose the crimes of the ascendancy party in Ireland, and rally all honest men to the support of Catholic Emancipation.

Never is Sydney Smith dismayed at the forces arrayed against him. He is scantier of respect for the great men who are on the wrong side—and to be against the removal of the civil disabilities of Catholics is manifestly to be on the wrong side—than for the little men; for the latter dare not disobey their masters. For the Anglican bishops, with their immense incomes of a century ago, for the bishops and archbishops of the established Church in Ireland in particular, with their tiny following and their tithes exacted from a starving Catholic peasantry—what was to be said for these Protestant bishops who on every occasion thwarted the efforts to get justice done to fellow Christians? These bishops, in their wigs and inflated lawn sleeves, were allied with all the hosts of the rich and the great who preyed on the unfortunate Irish peasant, and at the same time denied him every political liberty. Sydney Smith stood in no reverence to these right reverend fathers of the Establishment. They could not overawe him with their coaches and palaces. 'Bishops live in high places with high people, or with little people who depend upon them,' he observed, noting also that 'What bishops like best in their clergy is a dropping down deadness of manner.' Which was not at all Sydney Smith's manner.

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The stupidity, the folly, the cruelty of this treatment of Ireland—for the question of Catholic Emancipation was in the main an Irish question, the handful of Catholic families in England were insulted by exclusion from public life, a whole people was not oppressed¹—provoked all the humanity of Sydney Smith. The outrage was so intolerable, the injustice so flagrant, the arguments of those who withstood the Catholic claims so contemptible, the ignorance of the 'no-popery' party so profound, the attitude of many so utterly base, that Sydney Smith was bound to protest. Justice, charity, good will, and, above all—a sound whig—common sense, 'enlightened common sense,' he calls it, drove him to use his pen, to write, and write again; confident of ultimate victory, yet always insistent that delay was dangerous.

It is not enough to keep on hammering the enemy in the name of justice and common sense; the Irish Catholics, he urges, must continue their agitation. Silence and submission are fatal; since 'As long as the patient will suffer the cruel will kick.' As to the talk of the *Great Shabby* that the Catholics are their own enemies—that the violence of Mr. O'Connell and Mr. Shiel have ruined their cause—that but for these boisterous courses the question would have been carried before this time. The answer to this nonsense and baseness is that the very reverse is the fact. The

¹ Not that Sydney Smith would assent to the injustice to English Catholics. 'Is there a more disgraceful spectacle in the world (he wrote) than that of the Duke of Norfolk hovering round the House of Lords in the execution of his office, which he cannot enter as a peer of the realm? disgraceful to the bigotry and injustice of his country—to his own sense of duty, honourable in the extreme: he is the leader of a band of ancient and high-principled gentlemen, who submit patiently to obscurity and privation, rather than do violence to their conscience.'

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mild and the long-suffering may suffer for ever in this world.'

Thus Sydney Smith in 1827. Twenty years before this he had written: 'Little or nothing is to be expected from the shame of deferring what it is so wicked and perilous to defer.'

Throughout the controversy Sydney Smith never made the mistake of under-rating the strength of the opposition to Catholic claims. The prejudice was a deeply-rooted disease; the distrust of Protestant England of all things papal a heavy blindness. Time servers and the unscrupulous and ambitious fattened on this prejudice and distrust, betraying the good cause to line their pockets. For instance:

'On Monday you were a barrister or a country clergyman, a serious and temperate friend to religious liberty and Catholic emancipation. In a few weeks from this time you are a bishop, or a dean, or a judge—and speaking charges and sermons against the poor Catholics, and explaining away this sale of your soul by every species of falsehood, shabbiness and equivocation. You may carry a bit of ermin on your shoulder, or hide the lower moiety of the body in a silken petticoat—and men may call you Mr. Dean or My Lord; but you have sold your honour and your conscience for money; and, though better paid, you are as base as the witness who stands at the door of the judgment hall, to swear whatever the suborner will put into his mouth, and to receive whatever he will put in his pocket.'

(Not all, perhaps, Sydney Smith admits, 'have made this change from base motives; it is equally far from our intention not to say that many men of both professions have subjected themselves to this shocking imputation.')

Castlereagh and Canning, Irish born, are named as statesmen, whom 'the Court buys over, year after year, by the pomp and perquisites of office.' Both men recognised the injustice of the anti-Catholic policy. 'Yet for money, claret, and patronage, they lend their

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countenance, assistance, and friendship to the Ministers who are the stern and inflexible enemies of Ireland.' Political corruption is not the novelty some are prone to imagine. The phenomenon is remarked by just men in every century.

But the root of the disease, the prejudice of the no-popey John Bull, must be attacked, Sydney Smith perceives; the falsehood of the anti-Catholic propaganda exposed.

Catholics are persecutors—therefore they must be kept in bondage. Sydney Smith's answer to this popular fallacy is that the English Catholics also have their 'Book of Martyrs as well as the Protestants,' and he puts at 319 the number of 'Catholics who have suffered death in England for the exercise of the Roman Catholic religion since the Reformation.' To drive the point home he gives the names of a few of the martyrs—Southwell, Mrs. Ward, Mrs. Lyne, and Mrs. Clitheroe—and brushes away the 'uncandid excuse that the greater part were put to death for political not for religious crimes' with the 'I hope we are all too busy to need any answer to such childish, uncandid reasoning as this.'

But it is with the monstrous enormity of the penal laws of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that Sydney Smith proves the Catholics to be the persecuted and the Protestant the persecutor. More than once and in detail the penal code is set out in his writings, and the abomination 'of a code of laws which reflects indelible disgrace upon the English character, and explains but too clearly the cause of that hatred in which the English name has been so long held in Ireland' is made plain to all.

What of the double allegiance of the Catholic—to pope and king?—an alleged stumbling block to many. Well, what of it? Sydney Smith replies: 'the same double allegiance exists in every Catholic country in

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Europe.' And if 'these same Catholics were foolish enough to be governed by a set of Chinese moralists in their diet, this would be a third allegiance; and if they were regulated by Brahmans in their dress, this would be a fourth allegiance; and if they received the directions of the Patriarch of the Greek Church in educating their children, here is another allegiance.' What did it signify how many allegiances, as long as Catholics, like other people, 'paid taxes and kept clear of the quarter sessions and assizes.'

(Of course to Sydney Smith with his 'enlightened common sense' it was regrettable and absurd that people should prefer to remain Catholics when they might become Protestants; but there it was; and after all, he reminds his readers, 'for the first fourteen centuries all Christianity was Catholic,' and the religion of Catholics 'was the religion of the whole of Europe when the innovation began.')

As to the charge of untruthfulness brought so frequently against Catholics, the less said about that the better when the broken promises of the English Government are recalled. The articles of the Treaty of Limerick, signed in 1691, assured the Irish the free exercise of their religion: four years later came fresh penal laws 'the great and glorious King William totally forgetting the contract he had entered into.'

Not to revive the bitterness of past wrongs, but to obtain the removal of a very present injustice, Sydney Smith falls back upon history. It is by the use of history he would put the lying rogues with their 'no-popery' cry to shame.

For the injustice of the English rule in Ireland and of penal laws against Catholics was hidden from honest men by the falsehoods of the scurvy, venal knaves whose livelihood was in the 'no-popery' business.

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Sydney Smith never fell away from his liberalism. After Catholic emancipation had been carried he was as resolute against the establishment of a Protestant church at the expense of a Catholic people. In a post-humous essay he likens the Protestant Church in Ireland to the institution of butchers' shops in India. 'We *will* have a butcher's shop in every village, and you, Hindoos, shall pay for it. We know that many of you do not eat meat at all, and that the sight of beef-steaks is particularly offensive to you; but still a stray European may pass through your village, and want a steak or a chop: the shop *shall* be established; and you shall pay for it. This is English legislation for Ireland. There is no abuse like it in all Europe, in all Asia, in all the discovered parts of Africa, and in all we have heard of Timbuctoo.'

The devilish spirit that prompted the penal laws, and denied Catholic Emancipation till civil war was threatened, compelled the Irish Catholic to support the Protestant Establishment for forty years after the political disabilities of Catholics had been removed. It was against this spirit Sydney Smith so vigorously contended.

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