

# Personality and the press

The story of the clergyman Henry Sacheverell, who achieved widespread recognition in his day, provides an example of unexpected celebrity status acquired through popular backing and the power of the press. It also illustrates the political and religious concerns waiting to be ignited in the early 18th century.

Sacheverell was a High Church Anglican. He believed in tradition, ritual, and preserving the power of the monarchy and Church of England. He, and many other Tories, were concerned about the changes which were taking place, including the toleration of other religious denominations, high taxation caused by war, and the rise in power and influence of new men who had won royal favour.

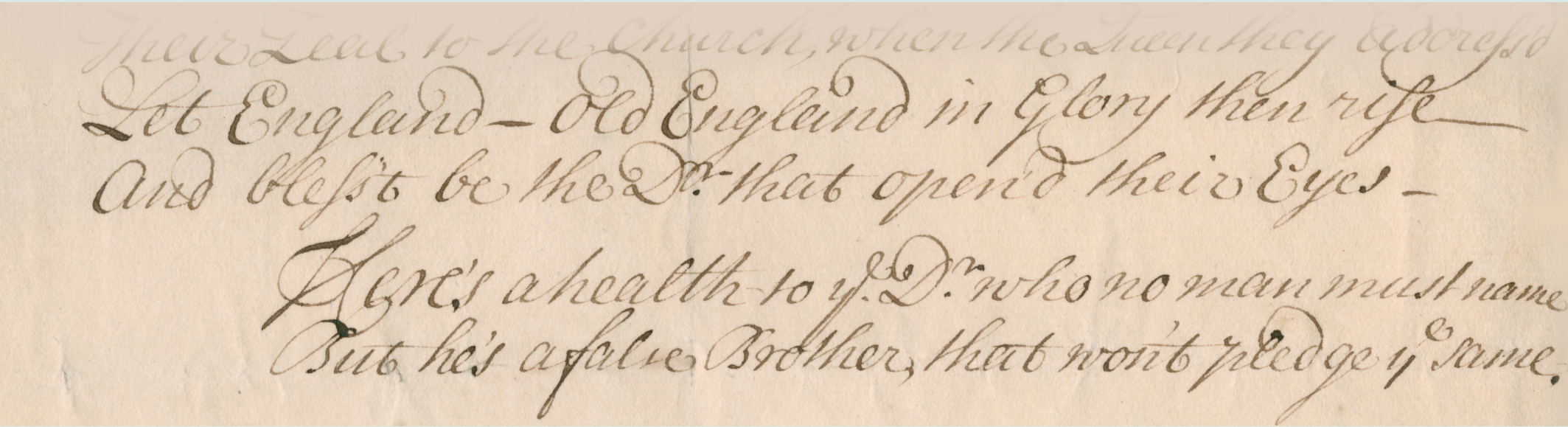
He voiced his criticism in fiery sermons, one of which was preached at St Paul's Cathedral in 1709 on Bonfire Night, which was also the anniversary of the Glorious Revolution. Instead of the expected remembrance of deliverance from Catholic dangers, Sacheverell warned of a 'Church in Danger' and blamed the Whig ministry for its neglect. Copies of the sermon became runaway bestsellers.

The Whig government tried to stop Sacheverell by impeaching him in Parliament. His friends and detractors used an increasingly effective press to publish their arguments quickly and cheaply for mass distribution. Crowds of his supporters massed in London, burning Dissenters' meeting houses and attacking politicians. His case became a *cause célèbre* and he was eventually acquitted.

The fact that such a relatively insignificant event could become a national issue suggests that many questions posed by the Glorious Revolution had yet to be fully resolved. These included fundamental issues concerning the status of the monarch, the power of the church, and links between ordinary people and politicians.



Portrait of Henry Sacheverell. With thanks to The President and Fellows of Magdalen College Oxford.



Poem, 'Here's a health to the Queen & a prosperous Reign', no date [c. 1710]. The poet believes that Dr Sacheverell, 'the Dr' has opened the eyes of the country to the threat to the monarchy and the Church. Portland Literary Collection Pw V 542

Let England - Old England in Glory then Rise

And blest be the Dr that open'd their eyes

Here's a health to the Dr who no man must name

But he's a false Brother, that won't pledge the same.

Poem by Matthew Prior, 'Dr Sacheverell and Benjamin Hoadley', c. August 1708. Matthew Prior satirises the controversies between High Church supporters (here represented by Sacheverell) and Low Churchmen (epitomised by Benjamin Hoadley). Portland Literary Collection Pw V 651

