

A Scottish Whig View of the Character of Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, in 1713

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I

To try to assess the character and political motives of a past politician is a complex process fraught with difficulties. The most obvious difficulty is the form and the amount of the evidence which has survived. In the absence of a diary and/or a collection of intimate letters, the most an historian can usually expect is the occasional comment in someone's correspondence. Very occasionally indeed historians are blessed with a contemporary's assessment of the person's character. Robert Harley, 1st earl of Oxford from 1711, and lord treasurer of Great Britain from 1711 to 1714, has proved more difficult than most to analyse. He had a reputation amongst his contemporaries of being devious and untrustworthy, gaining the nickname of 'Robin the Trickster'.¹ However, there were some of his contemporaries who attempted the difficult task of putting their thoughts on paper concerning Harley's personality,² the most prolific of whom was Harley's friend and sometime collaborator,³ Jonathan Swift, whose view of his subject's personality was that he was a good man with a few faults.⁴ Recently another, harsher assessment has come to light, which is quite forthright about its subject, but does pose some problems as to whether it is

¹ For the best modern assessments of his personality see Geoffrey Holmes, *British Politics in the Age of Anne* (1967), rev. edn (London, 1987), pp. 265-8; David Hayton, 'Robert Harley's "Middle Way": The Puritan Heritage in Augustan Politics', *British Library Journal*, xv (1989), p. 158: 'The character of Robert Harley, first Earl of Oxford, was a puzzle to contemporaries and has continued to vex historians ever since'; and D. W. Hayton's biography of Harley in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1690-1715*, ed. Eveline Cruickshanks, Stuart Handley and D. W. Hayton, 5 vols (Cambridge, 2002) [hereafter cited as *HPC, 1690-1715*], vol. iv, p. 244. In 1710, Wodrow described Harley as 'a mystery, and a very great man': Robert Wodrow, *Analecta*, 4 vols (Edinburgh, 1842), vol. i, p. 293. He is also one of Harley's contemporaries to describe him in 1711 as 'Prime Minister' (ibid., p. 324). For a discussion of this nomenclature see Holmes, *British Politics*, pp. 440-2.

² *The Wentworth Papers, 1705-1739*, ed. J. J. Cartwright (London, 1883), pp. 132-3: 'Caracteres de plusieurs Ministres de la Cour d'Angleterre', which the editor attributes to Lord Raby, later the earl of Strafford, a tory colleague of Harley's, whose opening assessment was 'Mr Harley is generally allowed as cunning a man as any in England', later adding 'now he passes for a tory he was formerly a great dissenter'.

³ For an example of their collaboration, see Clyve Jones, 'Swift, the Earl of Oxford, and the Management of the House of Lords in 1713: Two New Lists', *British Library Journal*, xvi (1990), pp. 117-30.

⁴ In his published prose works, Swift gives several versions of his opinion of Harley, ranging chronologically from 1710 to after the fall of Harley's ministry, and his assessments are all basically the same: a good man, with a few faults. See *The Examiner*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford, 1966), pp. 79-80 (1 Feb. 1710); *The History of the Four Last Years of the Queen*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford, 1973), pp. 19, 73-5, 178-80 (Swift's opinion of Harley in the volume, originally begun at the end of Anne's reign but only published after Swift's death, was based, almost verbatim, on his 'The Character of Robert Harley' written in February 1713); and *Political Tracts 1713-1719*, ed. Herbert Davis and Irvin Ehrenpreis (Oxford, 1973), pp. 135-8, 152 (the tract was 'An Enquiry into the Behaviour of the Queen's Last Ministry', written in 1715), and in this tract Swift does compare Harley unfavourably with the 2nd earl of Sunderland and 1st Lord Somers over his habit of secrecy (see p. 137). I would like to thank Dr Graham Townend for drawing my attention to these works.

a reliable source. This is a letter of March 1713 which is found in the Wodrow letters in the National Library of Scotland (the relevant section on Harley is printed below in an Appendix).⁵

The two problems associated with this document are: first, the bias, political or otherwise, of its author (which is, of course, a problem the historian has to confront with any document). The political bias of the author of this document is, from his writing, clearly whig, while he is writing about a politician who had been a whig in the early 1690s but had become a tory, in an age of heightened conflict in British politics – the ‘rage of party’. Indeed the section on Harley in this letter is preceded by a description of the current political situation as the whig author saw it: with the tories dominating the queen which put the protestant succession in question, Harley is using the queen’s favourite Mrs Masham to discredit the whigs, the ministry is favouring the Pretender and is against the revolutionary settlement. After the section on Harley, the author states that he is not in favour of the Pretender, while the people are jealous of popery, and the duke of Argyll having made a declaration against the Pretender is resorted to by the whigs.

A second bias, which will soon become clear, is that the author is a Scot, at a time, in 1713, when most of the Scottish politicians at Westminster – MPs and elected representative peers alike – were on the brink of trying to end the 1707 Anglo-Scottish Union over an attempt (which Harley had opposed)⁶ to introduce a malt tax into Scotland (which the Scots thought breached the terms of the union), one amongst many affronts the Scots felt they had suffered at the hands of the English since the union.

The main problem with this letter of 1713 is deciding who exactly was the author. The most likely candidate is Thomas Smith, MP for Glasgow Burghs 1710–16.⁷ We cannot be certain that it is Thomas Smith as what has come down to us is a copy by the Rev. Robert Wodrow (the celebrated presbyterian minister of Eastwood near Glasgow). Smith regularly wrote from Westminster to his wife, his father-in-law (John Crosse a merchant in Glasgow), the provost of Glasgow,⁸ and possibly to others. His letters were passed on to friends for their information, who may have passed them on to others, and some of these went to Wodrow (particularly those originally sent to Crosse). Wodrow would then make copies before returning the letters. On many copies of Smith’s letters Wodrow would indicate that the letter was originally written by ‘TS’, but not always, which leaves the question open as to whether the ones not marked TS were written by others. Wodrow indexed his copies, and in the index the present letter of March 1713 is given as ‘Mr D. Archer LaureneKir’.⁹ It is likely that Archer was the recipient of the letter rather than its author, and it is likely that Smith wrote to Archer who then passed it on to Wodrow. It is clear that the writer of the original letter was acquainted with Harley (see below) and frequently observed him at work, and was moreover intimate with the workings of politics at Westminster. In the absence of other evidence it seems a reasonable assumption that Smith is the author of this letter.¹⁰

⁵ Another letter in the Wodrow papers, of 1717, reporting Harley’s attempts to end his imprisonment in the Tower following his impeachment in 1715 for treason, describes him ‘as cunning in prison as in Court’: National Library of Scotland, Advocates MSS., Wodrow Papers, Wod. Lett. Qu. xii, f. 114: W. Gustart to Robert Wodrow, London, 23 May 1717. The present author is planning an edition of the Wodrow letters.

⁶ See below, p. 3.

⁷ See his biography in *HPC, 1690–1715*, vol. v, pp. 510–13.

⁸ Between 1708 and 1715 the provostship fluctuated between Robert Roger and John Aird. *Extract from the Records of the Burgh of Glasgow, AD 1691–1717* (Glasgow, 1908), p. 682.

⁹ David Archer, minister at Laurencekirk (see Wodrow, *Analecta*, p. 432).

¹⁰ For a comment on the authorial problems of the Wodrow letters, see *HPC, 1690–1715*, vol. v, pp. 510–11.

II

Wodrow in 1713 was not unacquainted with some aspects of Harley's character. In May 1711, Wodrow wrote to his wife¹¹ that '[t]his morning I saw a letter from Mr Harley [...] He writes with much piety, and has much of strain of the Scriptures'. What he read, Wodrow seems to have liked. Harley, then went on to describe his recovery from the attempt to assassinate him two months earlier by the marquis de Guiscard,¹² and to hope that

he, who has delivered his soul from death, may keep his feet from falling, that he may walk before him in the land, &c.; and wishes he may be enabled to do his duty to God, his Queen, and country, and that he may be caused to know the way wherein he should walk. He adds, that he may assure himself the Queen, and those that have the honour to advise her, will be so far from breaking the Union, or taking away any of the settlement of the Church, that she will not so much as give ear to a motion this way. And as to the surmises of the restoring of patronages, he was allowed by the Queen to let him and his friends know, that although two warm men had made some noise about it, yet she would never attend to any motions made that way; that the grants to the colleges should be particularly renewed, as soon as the act anent the post-office was passed.¹³

III

Thomas Smith's character of Harley was written just as the most serious political crisis for Anglo-Scottish relations in Queen Anne's reign was about to break, the attempt by the majority of the Scots at Westminster to end the Union of 1707. The move to extend the malt tax to Scotland, which triggered the crisis, was nearly the final straw for the Scots. Many saw it as the work of the Harley ministry, but in truth it resulted from the action of some backbench country Tories, who voted to reduce the land tax below the level wished by the ministry, which placed the ministry in a bad financial position. When the same backbenchers then voted that the level of the malt tax should be the same for Scotland as for England despite the poorer quality and thus a lower selling price for Scottish malt compared with English malt, the ministry had to accept the will of the Commons.¹⁴

Wodrow opposed the repeal of the Union, and it is possible that Smith's assessment of Harley (printed below) changed Wodrow's opinion of Harley. In a letter to James Hart, dated 8 June 1713 in the midst of the crisis, Wodrow, probably based on the Harley letter he had read in 1711, doubted

¹¹ *The Correspondence of the Rev. Robert Wodrow*, ed. Thomas M'Crie, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1842), vol. i, p. 228: Edinburgh, 18 May 1711.

¹² See Clyve Jones, 'Robert Harley and the Myth of the Golden Thread: Family Piety, Journalism and the History of the Assassination Attempt of 8 March 1711', *eBLJ* (2010), art. 11.

¹³ Wodrow assured his wife that '[t]his is very near the words of the letter'. Wodrow was at the time of this letter attending the Assembly of the Kirk in Edinburgh.

¹⁴ For the background see Geoffrey Holmes and Clyve Jones, 'Trade, the Scots and the Parliamentary Crisis of 1713', *Parliamentary History*, i (1982), pp. 47-77, reprinted in Geoffrey Holmes, *Politics, Religion and Society in England, 1679-1742* (London, 1986), pp. 109-38.

that the Court will ever go in to such a proposal, since the Union in this shape is so strengthening to a Court and arbitrary interest, unless some there have a mind to brangle¹⁵ the succession, and leave an open door for the Pretender to come in to Scotland. And, without the Court, I see not what such a proposal can issue in, but in fermenting the country, and disposing us more and more for blood and confusion.¹⁶

But Wodrow goes on, perhaps unflatteringly, to call Harley ‘the Grand Vizier’, and he believes that the earl of Mar, who is pressing the queen for an end to the Union ‘would do nothing without his [Harley’s] connivance’.¹⁷

IV

Smith’s assessment of Harley is important not only for the way in which some Scots viewed, and possibly influenced other Scots to view, the lord treasurer and his ministry in 1713, but also for giving the historian yet another insight into the personality of this complicated man as seen by others.

National Library of Scotland, Advocates MSS., Wodrow Papers, Wod. Lett. Qu. vii, f. 120: [? Thomas Smith to] David Archer, London, March 1713.¹⁸

[...] Whither my Lord treasurer [Oxford] is heartily in the interest of the pretender¹⁹ is a question, qch [which] I believe you would desire to be Resolved in, and as to this in qch our safety or ruin at putt [present?] Consists, I shall tell you qt [what] my opinion is. I believe him to be a man who will preserve his pouer [power] by any means, either by ye [the] pretender or H[ouse] of Hannover.²⁰ I must say that all his measures seem to serve the interest of the pretender nor is it po[ssi]ble for me to Knou not mens hearts to judge any otherwise yn [than] by his actions and if ever they make me believe, yt [that] he is in the interest of the H[ouse] of Han[over] unless the measures be Changed I must Resigne that infallible rule of judging the tree by its fruit. there are not wanting some honest men who think the treasurer will effectually Crush ye Jacobite interest, and yt he makes use of ym [them] only at putt to support himself ag[ain]st the great pouer of ye whiggs but between tuo such stones we are certainly in danger to be Crushed, and if he does not very soon explain himself in favour of ye H[ouse] of Han[over]. I mean after ye peace,²¹ these yt have the best opinion of him will ymselves be staggered. I Knou that some of ye Jacobites appear more diffident of him yn formerly, but I think this is noe certain way of judging. private

¹⁵ To wrangle, squabble, or noisily contest or dispute.

¹⁶ *Correspondence of Wodrow*, vol. i, p. 461.

¹⁷ *Correspondence of Wodrow*, vol. i, p. 462.

¹⁸ It is possible that this letter was enclosed in Archer’s letter of 11 March (see *Correspondence of Wodrow*, vol. i, p. 434: Wodrow to Archer, 23 Mar. 1713). I would like to thank Dr Graham Townend for supplying me with a transcript of this letter, and the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland for permission to publish. I have retained the original abbreviations, capitalization, spelling and punctuation.

¹⁹ James Francis Edward (1688–1766), son of King James II (d.1702), exiled in France, was considered by his Jacobite supporters to the rightful king of Britain as James III and VIII.

²⁰ In 1701 the Act of Settlement had placed the succession after the death of Queen Anne in the dowager Electress Sophie of Hanover, the nearest protestant heir, who died in June 1714, and whose son succeeded as George I on 1 August.

²¹ The peace of Utrecht signed by Britain in 1713 ended the War of the Spanish Succession. It was highly contentious as some of Britain’s allies in the war against France regarded it as a desertion of the allied cause by the Oxford ministry. One of its clauses guaranteed the protestant Hanoverian succession in Britain.

disobligations may occasion yt. ye Character of My L[or]d Tr[easurer] as farr as I can expresse it to you, from qt I have heard and ye observation of his Conduct is in short as folloues. he is one who Recives all sorts of men, in the very spirit of ye party he Knoes ym to be of. to ye Jacobites he is such to ye dissenter²² he is one of ym²³ etc. he is very dexterouse in making you believe you shall have qt you seek of him. tho if you Relye upon him its a 100d to one if you are not disappointed, yt is to say deceives you ut [with] as good a grace as any body Can doe. he seems to have no great stomach to ye drudgery of Bussiness,²⁴ and yris [there is] somthing very idle and sloathfull in his temper, qch many times Reduces him to very great difficultyes but yn yris no man more fertile in expedients to extricate himself of [?or] had [?has] more Courage in executing qt he thinks proper for yt end; soe yt his actions actions [*sic*] appear many time to flou [flow] rather from necessity then Choice, his great talent is and has been disposing members to a vote, qch he undertakes to Cary, but yet he seems to be but a lou [low] politician, to be at ye head of politick affairs. he is rather ane artful man yn qt they call a great and a wise man. the giddiness of ye English nation makes him houever succeed here, in projects qch he Could never have bro[ugh]t about, in nations yt are more steady. at ye same time the Torys like him because they Cannot get a beter. the whiggs think they Can never have a worse for ym. [...]

²² Those who dissented from or did not conform to the Church of England.

²³ Harley was brought up as a presbyterian, but later conformed to the Church of England. See Hayton, 'Robert Harley's "Middle Way"', pp. 158–72. Wodrow wrote of him that 'He never went to Church, but still to the Meeting-house, till he was made Secretary' [of state in 1704], *Analecta*, vol. i, p. 324.

²⁴ Early on, Harley had the reputation of being hard working, incorruptible, scrupulous and imperturbable (Holmes, *British Politics*, pp. 266–7), but towards the end of his ministry he showed signs of strain and began to drink heavily. Wodrow himself noted in his *Analecta* (vol. i, p. 324) of Harley '[i]t is said, sometimes he takes a bottle; but otherwise he is morall, and never fails to pray with his family at night'.