

THOMAS HOLLIS (1720-74): THE BIBLIOPHILE AS LIBERTARIAN¹

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Thomas Hollis was born in London on 14 April 1720. As a member of an established mercantile family of Baptist beliefs he neither lacked financial resources nor possessed a superior social status—circumstances which, throughout his life, he was careful not to disturb. He received no higher education, being sent for a year in 1732 to Amsterdam, to be prepared for a commercial career. The stay served no immediate purpose and it was not until 1740 that he entered Lincoln's Inn, where he remained until 1748: even then, however, he did not proceed to the Bar. On leaving he undertook a European tour, which he repeated on a much more extensive scale between 1750 and 1754. Until he then returned to England, Hollis's life had followed no obvious direction, as he seemed to recognise. His experiences had conferred some benefits: he had acquired a command of an impressive range of languages, being able to read Dutch, French, Italian, probably German and Spanish, in addition to Greek and Latin; without his residence in Europe Hollis could not have become, as Caroline Robbins has concluded he did, "intensely aware of the whole world of visual art, whether in sculpture, painting, building, or in the crafts of printing, engraving, and medal work".² What uses these attainments might serve had remained undefined. His first thought was to secure a parliamentary seat, but this ambition was reluctantly set aside: the obstacle was not created by religious belief—which in Hollis's case found expression principally in the form of denominational antipathies—but rather by refusal to advance his candidacy through any resort to bribery and corruption.

It was evidently not easy for Hollis to abandon all hope of entering the House, for he would gladly have done so at the

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, 9 November 1983.

² Caroline Robbins, "Library of Liberty—Assembled for Harvard College by Thomas Hollis of Lincoln's Inn", *Harvard Library Bulletin*, v (1951), 10.

General Election of 1760, if this had been possible without purchasing votes. He had come to realise that the times were dangerously vicious and urgently required reform: this he proposed to encourage by undertaking the circulation of the great texts of civil and religious liberty, those works that had sustained the public virtue of past generations of Englishmen and that might perform this service at the present day. The need for him to pursue this task had been steadily becoming more apparent. About 1756 he had become acquainted with Richard Baron, "an adorer of Milton, Sydney and Locke",³ and had quickly shared these enthusiasms to the full. In 1758 Hollis made his first gift of books to Harvard College: 44 tracts accompanied two volumes of Milton's Prose Works. For the following fifteen years thousands of books would be sent westward by the most generous donor colonial American libraries were to know: lists of titles are not complete, but the process of selection stressed publications relating to government, science, language and aesthetics; literature was excluded unless it involved politics. Hollis carefully considered and supervised every step, from selection to despatch. He chose bindings, marked important passages, and annotated texts. A Hollis volume was—and still is—readily recognisable, if only by its imprint of the cap of liberty.⁴

Hollis had found his vocation, and his activities grew prodigiously. In 1761 he persuaded Lord Bute to purchase the Thomason tracts for £300 and was delighted at their subsequent presentation by George III to the British Museum. This would have been accompanied by a collection, made on his own account, of nearly one hundred volumes exposing the dangers of the Jesuits, had Hollis not quarrelled with the Museum trustees. These books were in the following year bestowed upon the Zürich public library. In 1761 he had entered into the business of reprinting works that would sustain the spirit of liberty by making available Toland's *Life of Milton*—that "incomparable" figure whom Hollis acknowledged as "my hero, and the guide of my paths ...".⁵ This began a decade's involvement in his demanding and solitary task. His provision, in

³ [F. Blackburne], *Memoirs of Thomas Hollis* (London, 1780), p. 61.

⁴ Robbins, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-9.

⁵ Blackburne, *op. cit.*, pp. 98, 112.

1763, of a new edition of Algernon Sidney's *Discourses*, revived the memory and renewed the influence of that martyr of the Good Old Cause: in following years a stream of literature, both "canonical"—as he considered works by such as Hotoman, Henry Neville, and Locke should be denominated—and contemporary, sought to refresh the wilting forms of civil and religious liberty on either side of the Atlantic.⁶

The circumstances, details, and costs of this dedicated existence may be followed in the diary which Hollis opened on 14 April 1759, his thirty-ninth birthday, and maintained regularly—it would seem as a conscious record for posterity—until 3 July 1770, immediately prior to his departure to Dorset from London. He set down a wide variety of thoughts, actions, and events: his untiring efforts in the production and distribution of the literature of liberty; his interests in medals and coins; his acts of philanthropy and his problems with rented houses and suspect, surly servants; his attention to personal cleanliness and the taking of prodigious walks across London. Archdeacon Blackburne provided extracts in the *Memoirs* and aroused Horace Walpole's amused impatience at "the good creature". "There are", he reported,

thanks to God for reaching every birthday, prayers for continuance in virtue and nobleness of designs, and thanks to heaven for her Majesty's being delivered of a third or fourth prince, *and God send he may prove a good man*, and continued apprehensions of designs of the Jesuits against him. Then there are faithful journals of the days on which he went to such a bookseller's, and bought such a set of books, which he gave to such a public library! This is all splendidly printed and decorated with cuts by Cipriani and Bartolozzi, and with fine prints of all our saints, Algernon Sydney, Milton, Locke, etc. In short imagine the history of an old woman that goes to a mercer's to buy a bombasine, with etchings of the deaths of Brutus and Cassius ...⁷

Walpole's description was not inaccurate and it is quite impossible to take Hollis as seriously as he took himself: his life, however, as revealed in his diary is not without interest and significance.⁸

⁶ Robbins, *op. cit.*, pp. 188-191.

⁷ Walpole to Mann, 7 April 1780 (*The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis (New Haven, 1955), xxix. 18-19).

⁸ A microfilm copy of the diary of Thomas Hollis (hereafter cited as *HD*)

Hollis's fascination with political ideas did not extend to party matters: his diary and correspondence both exhibit a general indifference to ministerial changes, parliamentary debates, and public affairs not touching upon North America. Even within his chosen sphere his curiosity was limited: his devotion to the reprinting and circulation of tracts deemed to serve the cause of liberty stopped short of interest in British and American contemporary radical writing. His indifference could be overcome only by authors who offered a strict exposition of the present relevance of ideas and examples set forth in the established literature of liberty. Jonathan Mayhew and John Adams were the only American controversialists to secure his unqualified approval and support: in both cases his acquaintance remained sternly impersonal. For Hollis, the sustaining of liberty demanded the full employment of his energies: friendships and social occasions were ruthlessly excluded to ensure an absence of distractions.

The only sure introduction to Hollis was through the printed word. In the case of Mayhew this was provided by his 1750 Anniversary sermon, *A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers ...* and possibly by his 1754 election sermon: the connection was certainly established by early 1755.⁹ A reading of Mayhew's works was sufficient to confirm his probity as an agent for the distribution of Hollis's gifts of books, particularly those intended for Harvard. Yet when, after a number of years, Mayhew began to provide friends visiting England with letters of introduction to Hollis, he was sternly reproved for seeking to involve his benefactor either in public affairs or private business:

... I should be sorry ... if You, or the Gentlemen of Your Province should have recourse to me on any public occasion; and much more concerned: to deny them in form, and to return them their papers.

That I beg our correspondence may go on as it began, in a literate

was kindly made available to me by the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Va.

⁹ Charles W. Akers, *Called unto Liberty* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), p. 143; "Thomas Hollis and Jonathan Mayhew: their Correspondence, 1759-1766", ed. Bernhard Knollenberg, *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings*, lxxix (1947-50), 102.

manner ONLY. without intermixture of business of any kind public or private; much less charges or leads of business ...¹⁰

Ideas, not interests, must form their only bond.

The content of the Discourse was in no way original: Bernard Bailyn has asserted that "in the principles it expresses the pamphlet is a cliché of Whig political theory".¹¹ Its importance resided in a renewed application of those principles to a situation which, as the events of the next two decades would repeatedly demonstrate, gave rise to growing fears of the imminent extinction of civil and religious liberty. It was through Mayhew that Hollis was alerted to this danger which, particularly after the destruction of his early hopes for George III's example, dominated his thoughts and actions: as Blackburne noted, "it could not escape Mr Hollis's observation, that the remaining stream of our ancient and wholesome revolution-principles began to be diverted into a quite contrary channel a very few months after the death of the Second George ...": In the face of this challenge Hollis was forced to assume the task of reminding Englishmen of the bulwark to their liberties erected by "those immortal geniuses Milton, Sidney, Locke &ca".¹²

In England, this task involved discussion of theoretical aspects of the onslaught on liberty. Across the Atlantic, the debate had already assumed practical form. There, the protracted issue between Anglicans and Dissenters had reached new heights in the disputes arising out of the New England activities of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. The threat was not merely that of conversion: a far more alarming design seemed that of the establishment of a North American episcopate, a step allegedly dear to the heart of Thomas Secker, Archbishop of Canterbury. In Boston a pamphlet war broke out, in which Mayhew took a leading role: his exposures of Anglican intentions were, through Hollis, made available to English readers.¹³

The subsequent introduction of the Stamp Bill confirmed that the attack on liberty was the work of a conspiracy. The riots of

¹⁰ Hollis to Mayhew, 28 July 1762 (Knollenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 132).

¹¹ *Pamphlets of the American Revolution* ed. Bernard Bailyn (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), i. 206.

¹² Blackburne, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

¹³ Carl Bridenbaugh, *Mitre and Sceptre* (New York, 1962), pp. 214-242 *passim*.

14 August 1765 which marked Boston's rejection of the Stamp Act became known to Hollis through a letter from Mayhew. He lost no time in transmitting the news to the *St James's Chronicle* and the *London Chronicle* and, without revealing the author, handed Mayhew's letter to Rockingham. It was read with some care but not taken sufficiently seriously. Hollis was gloomy at the prospects but, since Pitt had withdrawn to the country, felt he could do no more.¹⁴

Hollis's activities in these months were both unavailing and contributed to the growth of his political fears. He had been reverential in his regard of Pitt and well-disposed towards the Rockingham ministry. He now found his hero to be absent in the hour of need and the administration unable to halt the introduction of the Stamp Act. From this he concluded that "the favorite [Bute] still held the reins of the carriage, and was the life of this ministry, as he had been of that of their predecessors ...".¹⁵ To what end was this control being exercised? The *St James's Gazette*, whose director, Noah Thomas, was receiving gifts of cash from Hollis for his services to the cause of liberty, succinctly declared that "the Stamping and Episcopizing our Colonies were understood to be only different Branches of the same Plan of Power".¹⁶

On 31 October 1765, the day before the Stamp Act came into force, Hollis first made reference in his diary to a practice which thereafter became habitual: he visited the New England Coffee House to read the latest North American newspapers, "some of which are wonderfully spirited and fine". Three weeks later he called upon William Strahan to request that he insert in the *London Chronicle* "a master 'Dissertation on the feudal and canon laws' ...", which had been appearing in the *Boston Gazette*.¹⁷ Hollis did not know that this had been composed

¹⁴ *HD*, 12, 15, 18, 23 Oct. 1765.

¹⁵ Blackburne, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

¹⁶ Quoted Bridenbaugh, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

¹⁷ *HD*, 21 Nov. 1765. Since the *Boston Gazette* published the essay in its issues of 12 and 19 August, 30 September and 21 October 1765, it would appear that Hollis did not require a complete reading to be convinced of its merits: the *London Chronicle* reprinted the four instalments on 23 and 28 November, 3 and 26 December 1765. Bridenbaugh (*op. cit.*, p. 238) asserts that the essays were sent by Mayhew, with an incorrect ascription to Jeremiah Gridley, and were kept for a year before publication. The second point is certainly erroneous and the first probably so.

by John Adams, nor would possession of the name of the young Boston lawyer have heightened his appreciation of a text that joined so effectively with his own preoccupations.

Adams had viewed the growth of the current crisis in terms which owed much to an early appreciation of Mayhew: in old age he recalled how he had read the *Discourse* "till the Substance of it was incorporated into my Nature and indelibly engraved on my Memory"; he remembered with equal fervour Mayhew's part in resisting an American episcopate.¹⁸ The four pieces he had contributed to the press were intended to alert Bostonians to the extent and gravity of the dangers they must now confront.

The argument was as simple as it was comprehensive. History was ordered about a single theme and its events recorded the progress of a perpetual conflict. Intelligence and tyranny could not co-exist: "wherever a general knowledge and sensibility have prevailed among the people, arbitrary government and every kind of oppression have lessened and disappeared in proportion". Tyranny was sustained by the two great systems of the canon and the feudal law. The first: "the most refined, sublime, extensive, and astonishing constitution of policy that ever was conceived by the mind of man was framed by the Romish clergy for the aggrandisement of their own order". It had maintained its dominance by reducing the minds of the people "to a state of sordid ignorance and staring timidity, and by infusing into them a religious horror of letters and knowledge". Its partner, the feudal system, was "originally a code of laws for a vast army in a perpetual encampment". Created for an identical purpose, this secular instrument confirmed the people in a condition of servile dependence "and in a state of total ignorance of every thing divine and human, excepting the use of arms and the culture of their lands". Between the two systems there existed "a wicked confederacy".

The Reformation had marked the beginning of the rejection of this malevolent alliance, initiating a struggle which reached a climax under "the execrable race of the Stuarts". The settlement of America at that time had taken place not merely for religious reasons but also through "love of universal liberty" and hatred of the "infernal confederacy". Its civil and religious government

¹⁸ Akers, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-94; Bernard Bailyn, *The Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), pp. 256-257.

was therefore a direct result of opposition to the old systems. The new society had been created by men of learning and devotion, who

saw clearly, that popular powers must be placed as a guard, a control, a balance, to the powers of the monarch and the priest, in every government, or else it would soon become the man of sin, the whore of Babylon, the mystery of iniquity, a great and detestable system of fraud, violence, and usurpation ...

The canon law and feudalism represented threats which could be countered only by abolition of the institutions through which they were implemented : reasonable forms of government would then replace mystical assertions of hegemony, which constituted the source of “the most mischievous of all doctrines, that of passive obedience and non-resistance”.

Success in this endeavour was dependent upon “knowledge diffused generally through the whole body of the people”. Public education was an essential means to this end : American achievements in this sphere must be safeguarded, whatever the cost—“the preservation of the means of knowledge among the lowest ranks, is of more importance to the public than all the property of all the rich men in the country”. All outlets of popular expression must be maintained : the press should continue fearlessly to assert its freedom, and American rights—indistinguishable as they were from British rights—must be expounded in response to oppression. Support from America would be welcomed in Britain.

Adams concluded with an appeal to those articulate groups in whose care the purpose of America was entrusted—the lawyers, the ministers, the scholars—to turn their attention to the struggle against encroachments upon liberty, employing proven weapons in the conflict : “let every sluice of knowledge be opened and set a-flowing”. Should they fail to do so, the gradual introduction into America of systems never expelled from England, a process which the intended episcopate and the Stamp Act indicated was already under way, would signal “a direct and formal design on foot, to enslave all America”, “a fate meditated for us, by somebody or other in Great Britain”.¹⁹

¹⁹ *The Works of John Adams* ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston, 1851), iii. 448-464.

It is easy to understand how the vehemence, clarity and certainty of Adams's diagnosis of events met with the approval of Hollis, for whom the concept of a universal and perpetual conspiracy against liberty strengthened rather than weakened the merits of the case. The essay made a lasting impression, for in 1768, still unaware of its authorship, Hollis reprinted the "very fine" *Dissertation* as part of a volume issued in support of Massachusetts' rejection of Hillsborough's Circular Letter.²⁰ Ever inclined to accord higher priority to ideas than to individuals, Hollis increasingly interpreted the American crisis as heightened by tyrannical ambition and personal betrayal.

The political alarm which the Stamp Act had aroused in Hollis, and which had been confirmed by Adams's essay, was not laid to rest by its repeal. The rejoicing was but temporary, for Hollis had given the entire credit to Pitt: on the day of repeal he had inserted an advertisement in the *London Chronicle* urging that all should "rejoice in the Wisdom, Fortitude of one Man, which hath saved You from Civil War & Your Enemies!". Five months later, Pitt's acceptance of a peerage filled Hollis with despair and a conviction that Bute had prevailed: he joined in the outburst of radical revulsion that greeted the news and shared in its popular interpretation. In his diary he entered Chatham's epitaph:

Speedily will be rung out
By Stuart Mackenzie and Co.
The Death's Knell of a late celebrated Commoner.

This departure continued to distress Hollis for months. From "the recent unparalleled prostitution and apostacy of the once magnanimous and almost divine *****", who now is totally lost in parchment and BUTISM ..." it was evident corruption was in the ascendant; that this had been made possible by the total defection of the higher classes from all public virtue, and that Bute and his "mongrals" still prevailed. Such was Hollis's disgust that he ordered medals, struck in honour of Pitt's services in the Spring, to be re-engraved with the damning phrase, "lost in parchment and Butism".²¹

²⁰ *HD*, 3-6, 21 June 1768.

²¹ *HD*, 18 March, 27 Aug., 9 Sept., 8, 17 Oct. 1766. Hollis to Edmund Quincy, Jr., 1 Oct. 1766 (Blackburne, op. cit., p. 340); S. Maccoby, *English Radicalism 1762-1785* (London, 1955), pp. 63-64.

After 1765 Hollis's political views remained unquestioningly radical, though his interest was often superficial and at best restricted in scope. John Wilkes seems to have occupied little of his time and even less of his admiration—a sentiment reserved for the struggle of Massachusetts in the cause of liberty. Throughout the Sixties any crisis centred on Boston could be sure of attracting the attention and mobilizing the energies of this systematic acquirer and enthusiastic distributor of colonial views. During the summer and autumn of 1768, Boston's resistance to the customs' commissioners aroused his anxiety and pride. After reading accounts of the disturbances in the Boston papers, Hollis lamented the general deterioration of relations between Britain and the North American colonies: "And that the people of Boston, the most sensible worthy of them all, and best affectioned to Revolution-principles and the Settlement in the House of Hanover, should now prove most uneasy and disgusted!". Further visits to the New England Coffee House strengthened this conviction: "My best opinion on the matters of uneasiness between Mother Country and Colonies is, that in regard to them, the whole Equity lies on the side of the North Americans; and that the Bostonites in particular have acted as became an estranged, free & brave People". Hollis might well have been taken for a Bostonian in exile, for his sympathies and prejudices accorded perfectly with that colonial cause.²²

If entries in his diary offer an accurate guide, Hollis regarded most political events as unworthy of note or comment, fit only to while away an hour "prating" in the course of his visits to coffee houses, printers, and publishers: nothing must distract from the duty of reviving and distributing the texts essential to the struggle against tyranny. Such a degree of distance did not, however, apply to his responses to religious questions. Here, a sense of alarm, which had preceded the development of his political fears, absorbed a major part of his time and energies and influenced his personal behaviour. The stress laid by historians on Hollis's defence of the colonists has served to distract attention from his religious obsessions: such partial appreciations would have aroused his scorn. In Hollis's view, the most constant, powerful, and sinister threat to the maintenance of English liberty was that posed by the activities of the Roman Catholic church.

²² *HD*, 25 July, 25 Aug., 4 Nov. 1768.

Hollis was continually occupied in urging the enforcement of the Penal laws and in press and pamphlet controversies designed to refute the arguments of Catholic apologists. To him, the predilections of many Anglicans revealed all too clearly the influence of Rome: Mayhew's campaign against the American episcopate was therefore much more than a struggle against rule from Canterbury. Convinced that his efforts to counter and expose the pervasive advance of Popish doctrines had not gone unnoticed, he recorded in his diary on 19 May 1766 the first of many entries concerning the response of his enemies:

This day I saw clearly that I was followed, watched-after, spied-on by at least three different persons in three different parts of the Town, Papists. From many circumstances it is probable I have been followed, thus, as I observed, suspected, several times the last winter and even earlier; to what ultimate end I cannot yet determine. But be that as it may, it shall not deter me to bear up and steer right onward, as hitherto, in all nobleness and magnanimity!

By November the spies were noted to have doubled in number, while the mysterious loss of 150 pages from Hollis's copy of Prynne's *Records*, comprising a section concerned with Papal usurpations in the aftermath of the murder of Thomas à Becket, could be explained only by theft undertaken by a priest and the corruption of the binder.²³ Comparable episodes similarly interpreted appear frequently in the diary: at times these entries occur daily, being particularly prominent in January and February 1767, between July and November 1768, March and April 1769, and from January 1770 until the diary breaks off in June.

Even on days when Hollis failed to record the presence of spies, it is clear, from subsequent entries, that he had felt himself to be constantly observed. Worse was surely to follow: he was convinced that his efforts to combat Popery would be rewarded by assassination. He had been, he noted, "constantly beset on all sides, when abroad". "No quarter of the Town is free of them, no Public Place, nor even the Environs of London; as well on horse-back as on foot".

The case as to these Spyes is a clear one. The Papists, Jacobites, the Leaders of them, from long time & circumstances, have found out, that I am a hearty, ACTIVE, friend to civil & religious Liberty, and

²³ *HD*, 19 May, 6, 13 Nov. 1766.

consequently a Detester of their Principles & Practices; and having Schemes of the highest nature in view, almost, it is probable, in execution; they are the Persons who set these Spyes to watch, but for the scrub, base times, me a very ordinary Man.

The final issue of all this, doth not seem hard to guess. But I will not fear events; nor be awed by them in any degree; but proceed ingenuously, as I am able, against measures not men, as hitherto, and place my trust, in humility, where it ought to be, with the Almighty.²⁴

To Hollis, daily life involved much more than the production and distribution of the literature of liberty: it was eventful and ominous, portentous and liable to swift extinction. Each venture to a printer or a coffee house involved dangers which only the crucial importance of the cause to which he had devoted his talents and his fortune required him to brave.

If liberty was to prevail, even a Hollis must call on others' aid. His practice of making cash gifts to newspaper publishers began in August 1764, when he presented Noah Thomas of the *St James's Chronicle* with five guineas, "my Mite towards enabling him more effectually to assert the Cause of Liberty occasionally in that paper".²⁵ Similar encouragement was offered to William Strahan, Jr., of the *London Chronicle*. During the following year Hollis used the *St James's Chronicle* to mount a campaign against the Papists: he saw this as an adjunct to Mayhew's campaign against the American episcopate and took care to supply the Bostonian with copies.²⁶ By December 1765 Hollis's cultivation of the press began to offer benefits: the younger Strahan "having requested me, handsomely, to supply him with some proper Correspondents for the London Chronicle. assured him of the benevolent assistance of three first rate, excellent writers in behalf of it". All were clergymen: the Anglicans Francis Blackburne and Theophilus Lindsey, and the dissenter William Harris. In order to ensure a sufficient supply of materials, Hollis later that month bought seventy volumes bearing on the Popish controversy and presented them to Lindsey. In February 1766 he paid for copies of the *Public Advertiser*, *Public Ledger*, *Gazetteer* and *Lloyd's Evening Post* to be sent to Lindsey until Parliament rose. In March he received

²⁴ *HD*, 4 Sept. 1768.

²⁵ *HD*, 2 Aug. 1764.

²⁶ *HD*, 19, 31 March, 26 April, 5 May 1765.

a letter from Thomas Mortimer, vice-consul at Ostend, and set to work to make its content widely known: it described Jacobite activities and the education of British children in Catholic seminaries in France and Flanders.²⁷ Publication was secured in the *St James's Chronicle* and subsequently in the *London Chronicle*, and copies were despatched throughout the country.

During the late summer and autumn of 1766 Hollis could record, with satisfaction, the appearance, under a variety of pseudonyms, of a steady flow of anti-Catholic contributions in the two London papers from his three writers. This campaign coincided with another extensive and protracted religious controversy initiated by Blackburne through his publication in that same year of his tract *The Confessional*. This assertion of the primacy of individual interpretation of the Bible over "a right to require assent to a certain sense of Scripture" opened a war of publications: by December 1767 Hollis had collected so many of them that he bestowed the set, bound up into ten volumes, upon the British Museum.²⁸

The task continued to mount. In November 1766 Hollis had acquired the services of another correspondent and dissenting minister—Caleb Fleming. He was the only member of the group of authors resident in London and Hollis called frequently upon him. He encouraged Fleming to prepare a plan for checking the growth of Popery in Britain and amended and extended the text prior to its completion in April 1767.²⁹ The plan, credited to "A Lover of His King and Country", first appeared in the *London Chronicle*. It repealed the Penal laws and excused Catholics from the oath of allegiance, but then proceeded to impose restraints that would have satisfied the most ferocious Irish Protestant: Papists and their estates were to be registered; the conversion or education of Protestants by Catholics was to be deemed treasonable; a Protestant marrying a Papist would forfeit his or her property; Papists were not to leave the country without permission or send children abroad for education; no

²⁷ *HD*, 2 Dec. 1765, 23, 25 Dec. 1765, 17 Feb. 1766, 11, 15 March 1766, 2, 3, 10, 13, 15, 20, 22, 27 May 1766, 2, 17 June 1766.

²⁸ *HD*, 15 Dec. 1767; Richard Burgess Barlow, *Citizenship and Conscience* (Philadelphia, 1962), pp. 138-156 *passim*.

²⁹ *HD*, 28 Jan. 1767, 13, 14 April 1767.

governmental offices and positions were to be held. If these regulations were adopted, Fleming and Hollis maintained, Catholics would find all their civil grievances removed, since the only penalties inflicted upon them would result from their own voluntary acts.³⁰

The conclusion, for which the restrictions which led up to it seemed hardly an adequate preparation, was justified by an inflexible adherence to the belief that a Roman Catholic could not conscientiously perform the duties of a loyal subject. Blackburne, who shared this view to the full, praised Hollis for his maintenance of Puritan principles :

It is just as impossible at this time as it was in the days of the excellent Milton, for papists, upon principle, to give any security for their obedience to a protestant government that can be depended upon. Mr Hollis was perfectly sensible of this ...³¹

Hollis's contribution to anti-Popery was far from exhausted. In October 1767 he persuaded the director of the *Gazetteer* to revoke his decision to close his columns to anti-Catholic correspondence. He concluded a year marked by the regular purchase and circulation of works on Popery with a successful approach to Fleming for the preparation of an answer to a number of tracts which had justified the Catholic position and attacked *The Confessional*. It was Hollis's wish that the pamphlet, which he suggested should be entitled *A Letter to the Clergy of the Church of England on the alarming state of Popery in this Kingdom*, by a Protestant Dissenting Minister, should promote Protestant unity as a security against Popery and praise Blackburne for his stand against Rome : Fleming was given ten guineas by way of encouragement.³² Hollis watched carefully over the

³⁰ The Plan is printed in Blackburne, op. cit., pp. 706-708, where the date of publication is given as 24 Sept. 1768. This is incorrect. It was first published in the *London Chronicle* on 18 April 1767, then twice revised and republished there on 27 June and 1 Aug. 1767. The *St James's Chronicle* published it on 8 Aug., but with a crucial misprint—"A Person preventing [instead of perverting] a Protestant to Popery"—which to Hollis "proves treachery to me, in some one who sets the Press for that Chronicle" (*HD*, 8 Aug. 1767). It was further revised and appeared in the *London Chronicle* on 6 Oct., with an abstract on 8 Oct., and at full length in the *St James's Chronicle* for 8 Oct. 1767. According to Hollis a Papist plot caused its publication in the *Public Ledger* for 27 Sept. 1768, and it was reprinted in the *St James's Chronicle* for 2 Oct. 1768.

³¹ Blackburne, op. cit., p. 360.

³² *HD*, 9, 10 Oct., 8 Dec. 1767.

progress of the pamphlet, reading and revising the text prior to its publication in February 1768. He continued to support Fleming, both by paying for newspaper subscriptions and by regular cash gifts, which he noted totalled 65 guineas between 1 August 1765 and 7 October 1768, representing “his mite for valuable services continued to the Cause of the Revolution and Whiggism, now every where ruining!”.³³

During October 1768 Hollis added Thomas Mortimer, now allegedly displaced as vice-consul at Ostend by “an Irish Papist, a Jacobite flagrant”, to his team of controversialists, setting him to work on a pamphlet reviewing *The State of the Nation* and which appeared on 22 December. Hollis found it an ingenious, valuable production, but, as he pointed out to the author, containing some wrong and much doubtful matter. Nevertheless, he was pleased at Mortimer’s appointment as director of the *Political Register* in March 1769, and provided constant suggestions for articles and occasional gifts of cash.³⁴ But despite this further access to the Press, Hollis grew increasingly pessimistic as to the prospects of his cause: the heads of conversation with Caleb Fleming, now the most intimate of his acquaintances, which he noted in his diary, dwell repeatedly upon the Progress of Popery, the corruption of the times, and the growing threat to liberty. The situation appeared to deteriorate from month to month: in March 1770 Hollis and Fleming “agreed, that a very melancholy scene seems to be now opening, for all those who wish well to the principles of the Reformation & Revolution and the Family on the Throne!”. But by April another conversation indicated that “a report, it seems, has obtained of some time past, that the. . . a Ppst!”.³⁵

In the later years of his diary Hollis had more than once noted that the cause of liberty was “fast ruining”. His efforts to avert this disaster were as unremitting as his concept of the scale of the looming conspiracy was grandiose. Between 1765 and 1770 Hollis constantly detected the machinations of that “wicked confederacy” denounced by John Adams. He saw Rome to be advancing at many points: in Ireland, Quebec, Nova Scotia, Grenada, and above all in England. The progress of Catholic

³³ *HD*, 7 Oct. 1768.

³⁴ *HD*, 25 Oct., 23 Dec. 1768. 3 Jan., 4 March 1769.

³⁵ *HD*, 17 March, 3 April 1770.

education, both on the Continent and at home, threatened to subvert the Reformation: an even greater danger stemmed from the continuing attachment of the Church of England to Catholic practices and principles. The retention of ceremonies such as those of 30 January mourning the execution of Charles I and of 29 May celebrating the Restoration of his son, demonstrated an Anglican preference for a dynasty of Catholic tyrants rather than for a truly Protestant monarch. Ample evidence was forthcoming that “the execrable race” would soon return to power as Bute, a Stuart by descent, employed his malign and unasailable influence to ensure the end of civil and religious liberty.

Hollis’s fears and hatred of Catholic revival were obsessional but not exceptional: they may, however, have served to distract his attention from the administration’s American policies. This narrowing of interest and heightening of alarm may have influenced his decision, in the summer of 1770, to leave London and retire to the tranquillity of his Dorset estates.

Such a move had been long in prospect: Hollis had first acquired farms in Corscombe in 1741 and had added to his holdings from time to time. If, in these surroundings, he could escape the dangers and exhaustion consequent on the struggle for liberty, he took care to do so in the company of his heroes: he named his farms Harrington, Sidney, Ludlow, Neville and Locke; the fields of Ludlow recalled the regicides; the lots of Harvard farm were known as John Cotton, Jonathan Mayhew, Andrew Eliot and John Adams. It was a process he called “patriotizing” his properties.³⁶

Here he died on 1 January 1774, dropping dead in a field—of, one hopes, an appropriate name—while talking to a labourer. He had left instructions that his death should be marked by the same ostentatious anonymity that had distinguished his life. “In the middle of one of these fields”, his biographer noted, “not far from his house, he ordered his corpse to be deposited in a grave ten feet deep, and that the field should be immediately plowed over, that no trace of his burial place might remain”.³⁷

Hollis had committed to causes that which he had withheld from his personal life: Blackburne remembered the habits of his later years:

³⁶ Caroline Robbins, “Thomas Hollis in his Dorsetshire Retirement”, *Harvard Library Bulletin*, xxiii (1975), 411-428.

³⁷ Blackburne, *op. cit.*, p. 481.

Most abstemious in his diet at times, and latterly ate very little and very plain; drank no wine or beer, nor used salt or spices of any sort, nor butter, milk, or sugar; but drank great quantities of tea morning and evening, with only dry toast. He was very lusty, and grew fat, nor was he reduced by his abstinence and great exercise. He was inattentive to heat and cold when in the open air, and attended only to partial cold and air in rooms &ca. He could not go through the little attentions necessary at entertainments, and therefore seldom entertained any but very particular friends; and, towards the latter end of his life, not even them ...³⁸

It was therefore not surprising that Hollis's death gave rise to little in the way of personal reaction: Andrew Eliot wrote from Boston that he had read the news in the Press but could not learn the cause of death or even Hollis's age. His tribute to Harvard's "greatest Benefactor" eschewed reference to the individual: "He was in a most eminent degree a Friend to Mankind. His memory will ever be dear to me, I cannot think of him but with gratitude & respect".³⁹

If contemporary opinions extended from a handful of like-minded enthusiasts, often not personally known to Hollis, to those which reflected a majority view of indifference occasionally interspersed by anger or amusement, later historians have not found the task of assessment to be easy. The contributions of Caroline Robbins have ensured recognition of Hollis's activities, but their nature and description still present difficulties of definition and assessment. The cause that he served has been variously declared to be that of "Imperial Dissent", "radical Whig doctrines", "opposition thought", "a fringe group of the far left" and a [commonwealth/radical] "tradition that was dying rapidly in the hands of Hollis and his associates ..."⁴⁰ The assertion of Hollis's function is clearly less difficult than the definition of his creed. He was undoubtedly a Whig but a

³⁸ Ibid., p. 503.

³⁹ Andrew Eliot to Thomas Brand Hollis, 15 Sept. 1774 (Eliot transcripts, Houghton Library, Harvard University MS. 882).

⁴⁰ Bridenbaugh, *op. cit.*, p. 201; Robbins *Harvard Library Bulletin*, v (1951), 412; Bernard Bailyn, *Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), p. 43; Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution* (London 1973), p. 165; Colin Bonwick, *English Radicals and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1977), p. 148.

somewhat unlikely radical: it has been suggested that the description is merited if it is understood that he was concerned "not with the need to recast the social order nor with the problems of economic inequality but with the need to purify a corrupt constitution and fight off the apparent growth of prerogative power".⁴¹ His hatred of Popery does not, in itself, disqualify him from consideration as a radical, but his growing preoccupation in his later years with that cause led to a loss of interest in the politics of both England and America.

Hollis's obsessions both diminished his influence and directed his activities. Without them, the task of conserving and reviving the literature of liberty would not have been commenced and sustained. He treasured particularly the contribution of his hero, "the divine Milton", and by his acts demonstrated his subscription to the doctrine that "A good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life". To be sure, not all of Hollis's literary benefactions were, in any sense of the term, good, but his reverence for the printed word and respect for its style of presentation identify him as a true bibliophile. If there is much justice in Walpole's judgment of him being "a most excellent man, a most immaculate Whig, but as simple a poor soul as ever existed ...",⁴² it remains the case that Hollis defied the temper of his times in order to promote a cause that was less good than he believed but more necessary than the great majority of his contemporaries were willing to admit. If he was less than a radical he was more than an eccentric.

⁴¹ Caroline Robbins, "The Strenuous Whig, Thomas Hollis of Lincoln's Inn", *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, vii (1950), 449. Bernard Bailyn, op. cit. p. 283 and n., where he declares, citing Ian Christie, that Hollis "even advocated keeping the masses illiterate". The passage refers, however, to Timothy, not Thomas Hollis. It has, however been pointed out that the example of Sidney was in no way democratic: "it had been Sidney's lack of "enthusiasm" on the scaffold, his reluctance to appeal to the "rabble", that Thomas Hollis and others had found attractive ..." (Peter Karsten, *Patriot Heroes in England and America* (Madison, Wisc., 1978), p. 52).

⁴² Walpole to Mason, 7 April 1780, *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, 29.18.