

Proclamations, Prayers and Print: the Transmission of Official Literature in Seventeenth Century England

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‘Wrangling Lawyers’: Proclamations, Censorship and the English Parliament of 1621

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In late 1621 the Lord Chancellor, Sir Francis Bacon, drafted two proclamations in anticipation of the forthcoming Parliament. The first called for the election of the ‘worthiest’ citizens to serve as MPs while the second forbade the discussion of matters of state in public. Coming shortly after the publication and suppression of Thomas Scott’s controversial anti-Spanish tract, *Vox Populi*, and in the wake of the failed Parliament of 1614, James I was desperate to ensure that a tractable Parliament assembled and one in which discussion of English foreign policy in relation to the Thirty Years War did not become the talk of the town. However, in an extraordinarily moment of royal control James dismissed Bacon’s work on the election Proclamation and drafted his own version, dripping with venom at the ‘wrangling lawyers’ who dominated the House of Commons and deleting all references to foreign policy. This paper examines the form and content of these proclamations, situating them in the tense political atmosphere of the early 1620s and the government’s attempt to censor and regulate debates on matters of state. I approach the subject from two angles, asking first, what was in Bacon’s draft proclamation that the King should take objection so extreme that he ignored the advice of his most senior government official and put his own hand to paper? Secondly, what part did printed proclamations play in state propaganda and how effective were they at censoring debate in the country at large.

Getting the message across: the problems of distributing materials for national days of prayer

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This paper will consider the distribution problems authorities faced during the English Civil Wars through a close analysis of their attempts to implement national days of prayer. In particular, it examines the much-neglected Royalists and the struggles they faced without control of London. The disruption to the postal service during the Civil War has long been recognised by scholars, and the ineffectiveness of the established ecclesiastical distribution network after the effective demise of episcopal power in

December 1641 is unsurprising. Yet scholars have largely neglected the practical implications of these problems. Close examination of how each side approached these issues is highly revealing. Parliament had distinct advantages: control of London, MPs and Lords with links to local authorities, and a dislike of set forms of prayer. Similarly, they had an effective policing network in London to prevent royalist post moving through the city. In contrast, the Royalists had a significant geographical problem once they arrived in Oxford as almost all the post routes ran through the capital. Furthermore, due to their commitment to set prayer, the materials required for a royalist prayer day were more costly and cumbersome to distribute. Through detailed examination of churchwardens' and college accounts, as well as private correspondence, it is possible to discern some of the distribution methods used as well as considering the reception of orders and forms for national prayer days in the localities. In this way, I will contextualize the relative failure of Royalist authorities in dispersing their message. In contrast to previous assumptions, this paper concludes that the reason Royalist prayer day concessions were largely unsuccessful owed as much to the very practical problems of distribution as to the outright resistance of some individuals. Such a conclusion leads us to question the practical problems of distributing the Royalist message more generally.

'That none may pretend ignorance': the dissemination of official literature during the civil wars and interregnum

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One obstacle to assessing the impact of print is the difficulty of establishing the degree to which printed material reached beyond London and its surrounding areas. This paper tackles this problem, and addresses the degree to which people across the the country and the social spectrum became acculturated to print, by means of the distribution of official proclamations and declarations during the mid-seventeenth century. This is done by exploring evidence relating to the ways in which such literature was produced (by whom it was organised, in what quantities it was printed, and how it was distributed), drawn from official records and government accounts. It is also done by exploring how such material was received and consumed in the localities, by corporations, parishes and individuals, through the financial accounts and order books of civic authorities and parish officers, and the correspondence between local governors and central government. By untangling evidence regarding the costs involved for both 'producers' and 'consumers', and regarding the problems encountered in the course of 'publishing' official literature, it will be possible to enhance our understanding of the degree to which political authorities sought to move beyond traditional mechanisms for reaching subjects, such as sermons and church bells, in order to address a broad cross-section of the population in a more sophisticated manner, and the degree to which they succeeded in so doing. What will emerge are surprising indications of the degree to which the process of promulgating official literature could be driven from within the locality as well as from the centre, and fairly powerful evidence regarding the degree to which even humble members of society encountered printed information, and used it in order to follow national politics, and in

order to inform their conversations on street corners, and in shop doorways, inns and alehouses.