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978-0-521-07074-4 - Robert Harley and the Press: Propaganda and Public Opinion in the
age of Swift and Defoe

J. A. Downie

Frontmatter

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the press**

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*Propaganda and public opinion
in the age of Swift
and Defoe*

J. A. DOWNIE

LECTURER IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

GOLDSMITHS' COLLEGE UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

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For my parents

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Preface and Acknowledgements

After the freedom enjoyed by the press on the outbreak of civil war in 1642, the Restoration reimposed censorship with the licensing act of 1662. Until the Glorious Revolution, with one short lapse from 1679 to 1685 (when Charles II attempted to control the press through the exercise of his prerogative), the publication of political literature was regulated by law. Each pamphlet and newspaper had to be licensed by authority, and without this seal of approval it was liable to prosecution. The abandonment of the licensing system in 1695, however, did not inevitably mean that the press had been accepted by government. For Macaulay the rise of a free press was of more importance than the signing of Magna Carta, or the acceptance by William and Mary of the bill of rights. But the end of censorship was due to the fundamental inefficiency with which the licensing system had operated, not to a more enlightened attitude. The press had still to win its freedom, although it had escaped for a time the shackles of restriction.

In the course of the eighteenth century the political press gradually became a permanent feature of English society. Alongside the whims of monarchs, and the decisions of parliaments, there grew up a further power in the state: public opinion. The years after 1695 – the age of men like Swift and Defoe – were crucial in this development. In 1712 legislation relating to the press again entered the statute-books. Significantly it sought to tax the press, not to censor it. By then the ministry had developed its own propaganda machine and propaganda agency, and these, in conjunction with laws regarding seditious libel and treason, were felt to be adequate safeguards. The stamp act was passed while Robert Harley headed the administration as earl of Oxford. It represented the views of the prime minister, and he also organised government propaganda. The purpose of this study is to account for his attitude towards propaganda, public opinion and the press, and to relate his

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attitudes to the wider aspects of political literature in the age of Swift and Defoe.

Two dissertations, one on Defoe's *Review*, the other on Harley and the press, are the groundwork for the study. The award of the Stott Fellowship of the University of Wales allowed me to rewrite and integrate my theses for publication during two years spent at University College of North Wales, Bangor. I should like to record my gratitude. Too many pamphlets and letters have been examined to permit a full bibliography. The reader is, therefore, directed to the notes and to my theses, should he require information about the evidence on which my conclusions are based.

I should like to thank the duke of Portland, the marquess of Bath and Mr Christopher Harley of Brampton Bryan Hall for permission to use and to quote from the various collections of Harley papers. I am also grateful to the duke of Buccleuch and to the earl of Dartmouth for making papers in their possession available to me. The staffs of the following institutions greatly assisted my endeavours: the British Library; the Bodleian Library; Cambridge University Library; the John Rylands Library, Manchester; Lambeth Palace Library; Leeds University Library; the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth; Newcastle University Library; Nottingham University Library; University College of North Wales Library, Bangor; the William Salt Library, Stafford; the Public Record Office; Carlisle Record Office; Herefordshire Record Office; Northamptonshire Record Office; Staffordshire Record Office; and Surrey Record Office. The librarians of the Goldsmiths' Library of Economic Literature, and of the Houghton Library, Harvard, were also kind enough to respond to my queries.

Mark N. Brown, Henry Horwitz, Giancarlo Carabelli and Lois Schwoerer provided valuable information on several points. My views on the stamp act owe much to correspondence and conversation with David Foxon. Tom Corns was a constant sounding-board for ideas throughout my time at Bangor. My examiners, Geoffrey Holmes, John Cannon and J. P. Kenyon, provided many insights into the problems at hand. Professor Kenyon also read the whole of the first draft in typescript. Pat Rogers's extensive knowledge of the literature of the eighteenth century was always available to me. His assistance has proved invaluable. Above all Bill Speck, my supervisor at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, has had more to do with the book as it stands than anyone but myself. He read and commented upon successive versions of thesis and typescript, suggesting additions and pointing out

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errors and other undesirables. Those that remain are entirely my own.

Finally the physical appearance of *Robert Harley and the press* will perhaps be some compensation to my wife, Keturah, for the time consumed in its preparation, and to my son, Nicholas, who has lived all his six years under its shadow.

Leeds, February 1978

J. A. D.

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Author's note

Dates are given in the old style throughout. The year, however, is taken to have begun on 1 January instead of 25 March.

Contemporary spelling and punctuation have been silently modernised in all prose quotations. In quotations from verse, where the sense might be impaired by this practice, contemporary usage has been retained.