

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-40969-8 - Richard Price: Political Writings  
 Edited by D. O. Thomas  
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Britain's Happiness, and the Proper  
 Improvement of it  
 (1759)

Britain's Happiness,  
 and  
 the proper improvement of it,  
 represented in a  
 sermon,  
 preach'd  
 at Newington-Green, Middlesex,  
 on Nov. 29. 1759.  
 Being the Day appointed for a  
 General Thanksgiving.  
 (1759)

*Psal. cxlvii. 20.*

*He hath not dealt so with any nation: And as for his judgments,  
 they have not known them. Praise ye the Lord.*

This psalm contains a warm exhortation, addressed to the Jewish people, to praise God for the blessings and benefits which he had conferred upon them.

*Praise the Lord, for it is good to sing praises unto our God, and praise is comely.*

*Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem. Praise thy God, O Zion. For he hath strengthened the bars of thy gates.*

*He hath blessed thy children within thee. He maketh peace in thy borders and filleth thee with the finest of the wheat. He sheweth his word unto Jacob,*

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*his statutes and his judgments unto Israel. He hath not dealt so with any nation: and as for his judgments, they have not known them. Praise ye the Lord.*

The whole of this passage is applicable, with great propriety, to this Kingdom on the present occasion. We have like reasons for joy and thanksgiving, and may now take up these words and say: *Praise thy God, Oh Britain! For he hath strengthened the bars of thy gates. He hath blessed thy children within thee. He maketh peace in thy borders and filleth thee with the finest of the wheat. He hath shewed his word unto thee, his statutes and his judgments. He hath not dealt so with any nation, and as for his judgments they have not known them. Praise ye the Lord.*

My present design is (i) to shew you how happily we are distinguished as a nation, and (ii) what effects the consideration of our peculiar happiness ought to have upon us.

In speaking on the former of these heads, the circumstance I shall first mention is our situation as an island, by which our internal peace and tranquillity are secured.

Nothing can be more affecting than to think of the dismal state of many of the countries about us, where the noise and tumults of war fill every ear, where powerful armies march in dreadful pomp spreading devastation around them, and numberless innocent persons are driven from their houses and families and all that is dear to them. In those countries garments are continually rolled in blood, and none can enjoy any thing in comfort or security. They live in perpetual terror. *They plant vineyards without knowing who shall eat the fruit thereof. They carry seed into the field, without knowing who shall gather in the harvest,* and their wives and their children and themselves often fall a prey to relentless insult and cruelty.

But we are exempted from all these miseries. *We can sit every man under his own vine and under his fig-tree, and no one maketh us afraid.* As long as we agree among ourselves, it is scarcely possible that we should become the seat of war. The ocean is our wall of defense, which guards us on all sides, and cuts off our communication with the neighbouring nations, so that no hostile feet or destroying armies can easily alarm our borders. We live in the quiet and full possession of all our properties and blessings, without being in any danger from the inroads of enemies or the depredations of lawless savages. We *hear* indeed of the dreadful calamities and desolations of war, but we only *hear* of them. We neither *feel* nor *see* them. And so little is the dif-

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ference between the state of most of us now, and what it was before the commencement of war, that, was it not for the accounts we read and the reports conveyed to us, we should scarcely know that we are engaged in war.

How great a privilege is this? How distinguishingly happy are we to possess thus, among contending nations and in the midst of desolation and bloodshed, tranquillity and security and almost all the enjoyments and sweets of peace?

Secondly. Another part of our peculiar happiness, as a nation, is the plenty and opulence we enjoy. God has given us the appointed weeks of harvest. He has satisfied our poor with bread, and crowned our seasons with his goodness. We want nothing that can contribute to make us easy and happy. All the conveniences and even the elegancies of life are poured upon us in the greatest profusion. Such plenty have we, that we help to feed and cloath other nations. Such is our opulence, that there is not a kingdom upon earth which can in this respect be compared with us. Notwithstanding all the drains of war, we feel no very sensible scarcity of any kind. Our wealth increases continually; and it may be questioned whether any nation ever raised, with so much ease, such large expences as have been laid out by this nation in the present war. Our commerce is extended from one end of the earth to the other. Our naval force is unrivaled. Our enemies dare not shew themselves before our fleets; and we are acknowledged by all the world as the sovereigns of the sea.

But there is a still higher instance of our distinguished happiness to be mentioned; I mean the LIBERTY we are blessed with. There is no country where this is enjoyed in such extent and perfection. The greatest part of the rest of mankind are *slaves*. They are subject to arbitrary and insolent masters, who say to them bow down before us that we may go over you, and who have their properties and lives entirely at their mercy. How melancholy a situation must this be; and how disgraceful to human nature is it, that men should be capable of enduring such encroachments on their natural rights; or that, in so many countries, such slavish forms of government should take place, human beings descend, by hereditary right, like beasts, from one tyrant to another, and the will of, perhaps, the most silly and contemptible creature in a nation, be established as its supreme guide and law?

But our case is totally different. While other nations groan under

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slavery, we rejoice in the possession of liberty and independency. Our rights and properties are, in general, secured to us beyond the possibility of violation. Every man among us can enjoy the fruits of his industry without restraint or disturbance. We can have no burdens laid upon us without our own consent, and the laws by which we are governed are not such as a senseless tyrant may please to appoint, but such as we ourselves by our representatives concur in making. The meanest of our fellow-subjects cannot have the least injury done him without being able to find redress. No life can be taken away, or any punishment inflicted on any one, without a fair and equitable trial. The King himself has not power to touch the person, to seize any part of the property, or to make the smallest infringement on the liberty, of any one man in his dominions.

But our religious liberty is the crown of all our national advantages. There are other nations who enjoy civil liberty as well as we, tho' perhaps not so completely. But with respect to religious liberty we are almost singular and unparalleled.

In other countries not only the lives and fortune, but the souls and consciences of men are subject to the absolute will of their governors. In those countries a person dare not speak his mind about religious matters, or avow any opinions different from those commonly received, without exposing himself to the greatest dangers. Nothing, surely, can be more dismal than for men to have their minds thus shackled, to be obliged to receive without examination the decisions of ignorant pretenders to spiritual authority, or to be deprived of a liberty which is the very last thing a wise man would consent to part with, I mean, that of worshiping God according to his conscience, and of professing those principles of religion, which he thinks, come nearest to the simplicity of the Gospel.

If it is a disgrace to human nature, as I have observed before, that men should be capable of enduring civil slavery, how much more ignominious and dastardly is it to suffer themselves to be enslaved in religious matters, or to follow blindly the direction of earthly masters in things that concern their everlasting salvation?

But we, Brethren, are unspeakably happier. We see the shameful folly of this. The principles of liberty have been thoroughly explained and are now generally understood and embraced among us. We well know that Christ is the only law-giver of Christians, that there can be no such thing as human authority in religious matters, and that the

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office of the magistrate is not to interpose in any religious differences, but to keep the peace, to secure the civil rights of men, and to protect and encourage all good subjects of all sects and persuasions. In this nation every one may judge for himself, and act agreeably to his judgment, without molestation or fear. A free and publick discussion is allowed of all points, even such as in other nations it would be imprisonment or death to discover any doubts about. All sects enjoy the benefit of toleration, and may worship God in whatever way they think most acceptable to him; and nothing exposes any person to civil penalties or censures, but overt acts inconsistent with the peace and security of society. The researches of learned men among us have been pushed farther than ever they were in any nation. An absolute and unbounded scope is given to enquiries of all kinds; and the consequence of this has been, that the greatest improvements have been made in all the sciences, and that we are now become the Fountain-head of knowledge, and the Instructors of the world.

Religious knowledge, I think, in particular owes more to us than [than?] to all the world besides. It would be wonderful indeed if it did not, considering our distinctions in other respects. Christianity has been cleared among us of a great deal of that shocking rubbish, which has been thrown upon it by Popery. And, perhaps, there never was a time, since that of the Apostles, in which the nature and design of the Gospel were so well understood, and its evidences and excellency so well explained, as in the present age and kingdom.

Blessed are our eyes, for they see, while those of others are shut. Blessed are our minds, for they are free, while those of others are fettered and enslaved. Here light and knowledge prevail, and from hence the arts and sciences diffuse their influence, and are propagated to the nations around us. In this Island peace and liberty have fixed their abode, and from hence superstition, persecution, and slavery are fled, while in other nations they still remain to confound and terrify and oppress the souls of men.

How is it possible to reflect on these things without joy and exultation? How happy is it for us that our lot has been cast in such a land? A land favoured with so many invaluable privileges and advantages. A land where, peace, plenty, knowledge and liberty abound and flourish. A land which has the best constitution of government, the best laws, the best king and the best religion in the world.

To this account of our happiness I shall add once more, that we

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have among us many persons of characters eminent for virtue and piety founded upon rational principles. I wish however I had more to say on this head. It must be acknowledged that our improvements in goodness have by no means been proportionable to those which we have made in other respects. But tho' this is true; yet, without doubt, there are in this kingdom many truly worthy and good men; and were they to be collected together from the different persuasions of Christians among us, they would, whatever they might be in comparison with the rest of the nation, appear, I imagine, a great multitude. These are, indeed, the flowers of the nation. They are the cause of all its happiness and its chief glory. Were these taken away, its whole beauty would be destroyed, its prosperity would be blasted, and immediate ruin would overtake it. That we have then any considerable number of these in the nation must be matter of great consolation to us, and it ought to be our whole study and business to add to this number by at least adding ourselves to it.

To say no more here. One branch of virtue at least there is which shines with peculiar lustre among us. Our charities exceed all that ever was known in any kingdom. And tho' there is among us a prodigious rabble of loose and irreligious persons, yet I cannot but hope and presume, that there is not a spot on earth of equal size which has an equal number of good persons in it, or where there are so many who understand so well what true religion is, and who so uniformly and steddily practise it.

What I have hitherto said, contains chiefly an account of such particulars of our happiness as constitute what seems to be our permanent and settled state as a nation, and what has been its state for a course of many years.

But there are some particulars to be added which relate peculiarly to the present time, and which, on this occasion, it would be inexcusable not to remember. During the course of this year, this happy and memorable year, you all know what occasions of joy we have met with, and what additions have been made to our glory.

The tumults of party seem to be laid asleep among us; and God grant they may never wake more. Scarcely one murmur is there to be heard any where. Our counsels have been wise, our measures vigorous and our enterprizes successful. Our Navy and our Army have gained the highest honour by their unanimity and bravery. Our enemies have been taught to fear and to feel our superiority. They

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have fled before us every where. They have been conquered by sea and by land, and in all the quarters of the world. Their towns, their ships and their fortresses have been delivered up into our hands; and we now appear among the nations great, rich, prosperous and formidable, whilst they appear mean and wretched, and are impoverished, distracted and confounded. With the utmost propriety, therefore, may we on this joyful day adopt the words of my text, and say: *Surely God hath not dealt so with any nation.*

One circumstance, indeed, there is, relating to our late successes and victories, which cannot but deeply affect our minds. They have cost us some of the best blood that was ever shed. When we think of those brave men who have sacrificed their lives in our defence, all the springs of grateful anguish must be opened within us, and it becomes almost impossible to avoid mingling tears with the joy of this day. But, my Brethren and Countrymen, amidst the concern we must feel on this account, let us remember how gloriously they have fallen, and that they are more the objects of envy than lamentation. Their example, we may expect, will kindle courage in others, and their spirit be transfused into thousands who will emulate their virtues and aspire to their glory. There ought not indeed to be one person in this nation, whose heart does not glow with this emulation, and who does not earnestly wish, that he could die the same death, and that his latter end might be like theirs. How much better is it to expire thus in a blaze of glory earned by virtue, and to go down to the grave followed by the acclamations and the tears of a nation, than to drag a worthless life beneath universal contempt and infamy?

Having now represented to you our happiness as a nation, it is proper that I should next endeavour to shew you what improvement we ought to make of it, or what effects the consideration of it should have upon us.

In the first place, it must be very obvious that we ought to be thankful for our happiness. We ought to have a deep sense of it upon our hearts, and to praise God for assigning us our passage thro' life in such a country, and blessing it with so many mercies and advantages.

"Tis to God we owe all that makes us happy. 'Tis he that bringeth down one nation, and that exalteth another. 'Tis from him that all the distinctions among the communities, as well as the individuals of mankind, are derived. All events are subject to his superintendency, and he doeth whatsoever he pleaseth in the armies of heaven and among the

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*inhabitants of the earth.* We ought therefore, in all circumstances, to acknowledge and adore his hand. We ought to ascribe all our successes to his goodness, and, with grateful hearts, to direct our regards to his providence, and to fix our dependence upon his favour, as the original sources of all prosperity and bliss. So distinguishing and invaluable are our national privileges, that it is not possible for us to be thankful enough for them; and miserably base and disingenuous would it be in us to discover in such happy circumstances no thankful emotions, or, amidst such a profusion of blessings, to forget and neglect the supreme Author of all blessings. There are, I believe, many among us who are capable of this detestable impiety and profaneness; and it cannot but give every good man great pain to think of their characters; or to observe that inattention to providence, and that readiness to ascribe all our advantages to our own merit, without any thought of the Deity, which prevail among us. It is with the greatest pleasure that I can observe to you here, that we have had a better example set us from the throne, which has been since followed in both houses of Parliament. May the influence of so noble an example extend itself every where, and be communicated to every heart in the nation. There are indeed, in the successes we have lately met with, so many appearances of a providential disposal of things in our favour, as one would think sufficient to kindle devotion in the coldest breast, and to extort acknowledgement and praise from the most blind and atheistical. In all events we ought to look higher than second causes, but in cases, where the fate of nations is concerned, to ascribe events (of so striking a kind especially as those we this day celebrate) to human agency merely, would show an insensibility and ignorance of the most shocking nature. Let us study carefully to avoid such guilt; and, while we honour and admire the instruments of our happiness, let us remember that they are no more than the instruments of it, and that our thoughts ought always to be directed primarily and chiefly to that Almighty Being who is the cause of all causes, the ruler of all events, and the *giver of every good and perfect gift.*

The antient heathens thought they did the greatest honour to their Heroes and Warriors, when they represented them as favoured of heaven, and indebted to superior power for their successes.

The Psalmist, after mentioning in my text the peculiar happiness of the Jewish nation, adds immediately, *Praise ye the Lord.* No exhortation could be more properly added. We have as much reason to



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praise the Lord as the Jews had. We seem to be, as they were, his peculiar and favourite people; and nothing can be more fit than that, with joy and triumph, we should *magnify his holy name*.

Secondly, the peculiar happiness we enjoy ought to lead us to the general practise of virtue and religion. This, above all things, ought to be the effect of God's goodness to us. The unspeakable riches of his forbearance and love should engage us to amend our evil ways, and to fear and obey him. We shall shew the most shameful perverseness, if we convert the benefits he heaps upon us into instruments of rebellion against him, or make the plenty and the liberty with which he distinguishes us, the occasions of luxury and licentiousness.

We are now, God be praised, a great, a free and powerful people. As far as we have among us any principles of true ingenuity, the consideration of this will make us ambitious to shew ourselves worthy of our advantages by our integrity, humanity, and piety. The continuance of our happiness depends entirely on the practise of righteousness among us. It is this alone that exalteth a nation, and that can maintain its dignity and superiority. If our remarkable successes produce no other effect than to increase irreligion among us, or to make us more proud and wanton, and mad after pleasure; then may we well fear, that our glory will be soon laid in the dust, and our enemies, now under our feet, raised up to humble and chastise us. Let then every one of us labour to the greatest extent of his power to practise virtue himself, and to promote it in others. Thus shall we be the means of strengthening in the best manner the foundations of our public happiness, and do the greatest service to our country. Nothing need give us the least pain about this kingdom, except the vice and irreligion which prevail in it. Every vicious man is a canker at the root of our happiness, and a curse to his country. Sin, without doubt, is the worst enemy a nation can have; and our sins are peculiarly aggravated by being committed in a land blest with such light as ours enjoys. But, yet, we find that heaven smiles upon us, and that we are happy beyond example. What then should we be, and how should we be favoured, did publick virtue prevail among us in proportion to our successes and advantages?

Thirdly, a sense of our peculiar happiness ought to engage us to endeavour to establish and improve it. After advancing so far, it will be inexcusable to stop short, or to neglect doing our utmost to push things to that point of perfection which we have brought so nearly

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within our reach. Our glory is great. How ambitious should we be to place it above all danger, and to wipe off from it every stain? Is it not too sadly notorious, and has it not been often lamented by the wisest and best men amongst us, that, in our constitution, both civil and ecclesiastical, there are many particulars, which greatly want amendment, and some of which are inconsistent with that liberty, which is the chief subject of our boast and triumph, and really a scandal to a great and wise people?

It would be very easy to give a particular recital of these, and to mention many alterations and amendments, which would make us greater and happier. What an addition, for instance, to our strength and riches would be produced by encouraging foreign Protestants to settle among us? What a dreadful load of prevarication and perjury, which overwhelms the integrity, and destroys the souls of multitudes about us, might be taken off by abolishing all useless tests and lessening the number of oaths? At the time that our present religious establishment was made, the nation was but just emerging from Popery. Is it possible then, that it should be entirely agreeable to the purity of the Christian doctrine and worship, or that it should want no review in order to secure its safety, and adapt it to a more improved and enlightened age?

But I will not enlarge here, lest I should offend any worthy men, and deviate into what would be inconsistent with the design of this day.

Were those alterations and amendments made effectually but willingly, which almost every body now sees to be necessary, and which, as generous sentiments spread, are daily growing more and more necessary; and were we likewise heartily to love one another amidst our religious differences, and to study above all things to imbibe the spirit and to obey the precepts of our holy religion, nothing would be wanting to raise us to the highest pitch of grandeur and prosperity, and to make us the pride and wonder of the earth.

In the mean time, however, it is, I think, our duty, as private men, to do what we can towards removing those offences which dishonour our country, by declaring our sentiments about them, on all proper occasions, with modesty and humility; by never complying in any instance contrary to our sentiments; and giving as far as possible, a publick testimony in favour of universal liberty and the simplicity of the Gospel. As long as wise men will not do this, or indulge timidity