

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11480-6 - Thomas Hollis of Lincoln's Inn: A Whig and his Books

W. H. Bond

Excerpt

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I

The anonymous republican

ON FRIDAY, 20 April 1781, Samuel Johnson and James Boswell spent what Boswell said was 'one of the happiest days that I remember to have enjoyed in the whole course of my life'. The occasion was a party given by the widow of David Garrick, her first social event since her husband's death in 1779. It was a small gathering of bluestockings and other literati, and limited to close friends of the Garricks. Boswell had such a good time that he confessed to being less than usually diligent and successful in recording the conversation, but he managed to reconstruct some of it, during the course of which an unexpected name cropped up. I quote the sketchier and less familiar version found in the rough notes of his journal. The curious may be interested to see for themselves how Boswell expanded, rearranged, and embroidered this raw material in his *Life of Johnson*.¹

Before dinner Hollis was talked of. [Of course this is our eponymous hero, Thomas Hollis V, who had died in 1774.] Mrs Carter said he talked uncharitably of people. Dr. Johnson with great sophistry said, 'Who is the worse for being talked of uncharitably? Hollis was a dull, poor creature as ever lived.' He said he believed [*sic*] Hollis would not have done harm to a Man of opposite principles. 'Once at the Society of Arts when an Advertisement was to be drawn up, he pointed me out as a Man who could do it best. This was kindness to me. I however slept away.' Mrs. Carter doubted he was an Atheist. 'I don't know that,' said the Doctor, smiling. 'He might perhaps have become one if he had had time to ripen. He might have exuberated into an Atheist.'

And the conversation turned to other topics.

But one may wonder why it had turned to Thomas Hollis at all, that 'dull, poor creature', as they thought him, who had been dead nearly seven and a half years, and whose name appears nowhere else in Boswell's *Life*. The cause was probably the publication in 1780 of Archdeacon Francis Blackburne's monumental (and anonymous, and according to Horace Walpole, deadly dull) *Memoirs of Thomas Hollis*.

¹ *The Journal of James Boswell 1779–1781*, in *Private Papers of James Boswell* ed. Geoffrey Scott and Frederick A. Pottle (privately printed 1932) 14, p. 203; *Boswell's Life of Johnson* ed. G. B. Hill and L. F. Powell (Oxford 1934) 4, pp. 96–8.

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In itself this hardly deserved the condescension of Dr Johnson and the spite of Mrs Carter. But in 1779, after the main text of the *Memoirs* had been set and printed, but before its publication, Johnson published the first volumes of his *Lives of the Poets*, in the second volume of which appeared his highly derogatory account of John Milton, a hero to both Blackburne and his deceased friend Hollis.

Blackburne wrote at white heat a spirited defence of Milton that was also a personal attack on Samuel Johnson. Fifty-four quarto pages were inserted in the middle of the *Memoirs of Thomas Hollis*; repeated and starred pagination and signatures make the insertion obvious,¹ and the text was also separately issued in a duodecimo edition uniform in size with Johnson's *Lives*. If the company at Mrs Garrick's table had not read Blackburne's attack, they must have known of it.

Blackburne freely acknowledged Johnson's literary stature and achievements, but strongly deplored his denigration of Milton as well as the turning of his pen against Whig republicanism and in favour of what Blackburne regarded as repression of civil and religious liberties. Of course it was neither the first nor the last manifestation of Johnson's deeply rooted High Church Toryism, opposite principles indeed to those held by Blackburne, who was the author of *The Confessional*, and by Hollis, the sturdy Dissenter who had laboured under the political and social disabilities of non-conformity in the eighteenth century.

Directly and in so many words Blackburne accused Johnson of literary prostitution. No wonder that 'Dr. Johnson *with great sophistry*' – we can now understand Boswell's choice of the word, which incidentally disappeared in the version to be found in the *Life* – no wonder Dr Johnson said, 'Who is the worse for being talked of uncharitably?' and lashed out at the subject of the *Memoirs*, their author being anonymous. Later you can judge these disparagements for yourselves; meantime, it may be noted that Johnson knew Hollis better and owed him more than he admitted, while Boswell thought enough of Hollis to present to him a specially bound copy of his *Account of Corsica*.²

Because there is a profusion – Dr Johnson might have said an exuberance – of Thomas Hollises, let me identify the one who is my

¹ Pp. *533–84* (rectos and versos are alternately preceded and followed by the asterisk).

² W. H. Bond 'Thomas Hollis and Samuel Johnson' in *Johnson and His Age* ed. James Engell (Cambridge, Mass. 1984), pp. 83–105. On Boswell's gift to Hollis, see *The Rothschild Catalogue* (Cambridge 1954) 1, p. 89 no. 447. Clearly Boswell knew Hollis better than he chose to reveal either in the *Life* or in his journals.

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subject, and explain how he became so deeply involved with Harvard College. Thomas Hollis of Lincoln's Inn was the fifth and last of that name, the descendant and heir of a tribe of wealthy and successful manufacturers and merchants, Dissenters in religion and Old Whigs in politics. The first Thomas Hollis prospered as a whitesmith and cutler in Rotherham in the West Riding of Yorkshire, where he died in 1663. He founded the Sheffield Hospital, a charity to maintain sixteen poor cutlers' widows, and was a mainstay of the Upper Chapel in Sheffield; both institutions exist to this day. His eldest son, the second Thomas, the only child of his first wife Ellen (Ramskar), was born in Rotherham in 1634, and was apprenticed at the age of fourteen to his uncle, John Ramskar, also a cutler. In 1654 Ramskar sent Thomas II to his London office, where he eventually set up as an independent merchant. He died there in 1718. He and his wife, Anne (Thorner), worshipped at Pinner's Hall, London's leading Independent Meeting House, and in 1679 he secured a ninety-nine-year lease of the Hall, which was served during most of the eighteenth century by a line of distinguished Dissenting ministers including Isaac Watts and Caleb Fleming, all closely associated with the Hollis family.

It was through Thomas II and his brother-in-law Robert Thorner that the Hollis family first became involved with the fortunes of Harvard College. Early in 1688 the Reverend Increase Mather of Boston in the Massachusetts Bay Colony travelled to London, partly to escape legal persecution at the hands of Edward Randolph, but even more to try to negotiate the terms of a new charter for the colony to replace the old royal charter, which had been declared forfeit in 1684. The colonists wished to avoid provisions disadvantageous to Dissenters and to have more control over their legislative affairs.

The cancellation of the charter of the colony clearly threatened to invalidate Harvard College's charter of 1650 which depended on it, and to eliminate at a stroke the President and Fellows, and the Board of Overseers, the College's two governing bodies. Its governance was already in a precarious state. After the death of President John Rogers in 1684 no one could be found who was both qualified and willing to fill the vacancy. Increase Mather was induced to become *Praeses pro tempore* while continuing to devote most of his time and energy to his duties as minister of the Second Church in Boston. In 1686 Joseph Dudley received the royal commission as President of the Council for New England, and replaced the elected General Court with an appointed Council. Harvard's governing boards were indeed eliminated. To take

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their place, Dudley named Mather to be Rector of the College and entrusted its management to him and to Tutors John Leverett and William Brattle. But the College was not safe, for there were those in England and America who viewed it with suspicion and hostility. The securing of a new College charter seemed essential for its preservation.

Mather's embassy, which included the closing days of the reign of James II and the beginning of that of William and Mary, lasted until 1692 and ended with a qualified success. The Colonial charter that eventually emerged was not all that the colonists might have desired. Most colonial administrators were still appointed by the Crown without much (or indeed any) participation by those administered, but the elective legislature was restored; and there was nothing that directly threatened Harvard College. In the end, after no fewer than eight revisions of its constitution, in 1708 Harvard reverted to the form prescribed by the Charter of 1650.¹

Mather took advantage of his London sojourn to gain a wide acquaintance in court and government circles, and even more so in the ranks of the leading Dissenters. Among these were Thomas II and his brother-in-law, Robert Thorner, both of whom became interested in Harvard, and thus began the family's long relationship with the college. Thorner's will, executed in 1690, included a provision for £500 to be given to Harvard upon the expiration of certain long leases; because of this peculiarity it was known as 'Thorner's Trust', and was not wound up until 1775. Thomas II and III, among others, served as Thorner's executors, and successive members of the Hollis family became trustees of the complicated legacy, until eventually Thomas V and his cousin Timothy bore the sometimes vexing responsibility. Over the many years of its life there were sundry lawsuits concerning boundaries and rights of way, and other beneficiaries than Harvard were involved.²

With all this, the second Thomas did not forget his Midland origins,

¹ Much more detail about Increase Mather in England may be found in Kenneth Ballard Murdock *Increase Mather, the Foremost American Puritan* (Cambridge, Mass. 1925), pp. 155–286; on Hollis, Thorner, and Harvard, see pp. 276–8. For the tangled affairs of the College at this period, see Samuel Eliot Morison *Harvard in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass. 1936), pp. 472–88.

² Thus Timothy wrote to Thomas, 16 April 1772. 'What Ridiculous foolish Things these Trusts are founded in Vanity Superstition & a false Notion of Goodness You know My Sentiments of them these Many Years Past Were it not for their being so Connected with My family & Ancestors I wd. have Nothing to do with them But being thus Unavoidably Engaged I think My self Obliged to do My Best while I am Able. . . .' (from Timothy's retained copy in Harvard, MS Eng 1191.1).

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for he helped to found the Dissenters' meeting-hall in Sheffield, the Upper Chapel; endowed a Free School there for tradesmen's and artificers' children; and augmented the foundation of the Sheffield Hospital. The latter two charities also came to be a worrisome charge for Thomas V and his cousin Timothy, for both the Hollis School and the Hospital suffered dilapidations and other unanticipated problems.¹

Thomas II's eldest son was the third Thomas Hollis, who twice married but died without issue in 1730. As one of the trustees of Thorner's Trust, he was kept in touch with the affairs of Harvard College. He was the first of the Hollis name to be a major benefactor. Others of his generation and the next also helped the small college in the other Cambridge, but curiously enough none of the seventeenth- or eighteenth-century Hollises ever crossed the Atlantic to inspect the college for themselves. Their good works were founded on faith, reinforced by the reports of travellers, correspondents, and agents in and from the New World.

It was Thomas Hollis III who established the Hollis Professorships in Divinity and in Natural Philosophy, the oldest chairs at Harvard, indeed in North America; and he provided other benefits as well, amounting in all to at least £5,000, a very large sum for those days. If Harvard's money managers had followed today's practices, his and later Hollis endowments would be among its largest. But until relatively recent times they were carried on the books at their original amount, and they remain relatively modest. The Hollis gifts were so useful that the President and Fellows named one of the new buildings in the College for the donor. (Thorner's Trust, however, survives only as a few sentences in histories of the College. Its proceeds were not set up as a separate endowment, but simply absorbed into the general funds.)

With his brothers Nathaniel and John, the third Thomas was also generous to charities in England, re-founding the Sheffield Hospital (later known as Hollis Hospital) and supporting Baptist and Independent religious societies. The fourth Thomas Hollis was the eldest son of

¹ For information about the Upper Chapel in Sheffield, the Sheffield Hospital Trust, and Thorner's Trust I am indebted to the Reverend Peter B. Godfrey, BA, present Minister of the Upper Chapel, who kindly answered questions and sent photocopies of newspaper cuttings and an excellent article by Malcolm Mercer 'The Hollis Educational Trust: A Nonconformist Contribution to Elementary Education' *Transactions of the Hunter Archaeological Society* (1938), pp. 68 ff. The Chapel, now located in Norfolk Street, is Unitarian though originally designated as Presbyterian. The Hospital continues with its original purpose as Hollis's Hospital, but is now governed by the local authority rather than its traditional Board of Trustees.

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Nathaniel, and the fifth Thomas Hollis – our subject – was the son of Thomas IV.

Thomas Hollis V was born in London on 14 April 1720 – an anniversary he never failed to observe with pious meditations and honourable resolutions, faithfully recorded in his *Diary*. Mrs Carter, among others, ‘doubted he was an Atheist’. On the contrary, he was deeply religious, but simply no church-goer. Even the most independent Dissenting sect sooner or later established regulations, often as strict as those of the Church of England or the Church of Rome. Hollis reacted strongly against all man-made ecclesiastical forms and rules, and could find no congregation in which he felt wholly comfortable.

Meanwhile he exhibited Lockeian toleration for those whose views did not agree with his own. Thus, in his twenties, when the acquisition of estates in Dorset brought him the bestowal of several livings in the Church of England, the strictest Anglican could not have been more punctilious in making sure that the church authorities approved his choices, and that the duties of the parish would be faithfully discharged by the incumbent. Indeed, Hollis had a wide and close acquaintance with churchmen of every stripe, from the Archbishop of Canterbury to such latitudinarians as his own biographer, Blackburne. His friends and correspondents included Roman Catholics, Jews, Quakers, and Dissenters of every sect; all he required was that no man should attempt to regulate the views or restrict the liberties of any other.

Most of what we know of his early life comes from the *Memoirs*. His earliest years were spent with his maternal grandparents, Mr and Mrs Scott of Wolverhampton. He began formal education not many miles away at the Free School in Newport, and after four or five years he was put under a tutor at St Albans. A writing-master, one Mr Fuller, taught him the handsome, vigorous, and legible hand that he employed to the end of his life. At the age of thirteen he was sent to Amsterdam, to learn accounting and the Dutch and French languages, and generally to prepare to return to London and take his part in the family business.

But when Thomas was only fifteen, his father died, leaving him sole heir, destined to become at his majority a wealthy man. John Hollister, then Treasurer of Guy's Hospital (of which Thomas was later a Trustee), became his guardian. A career in public service seemed to open before him, and a liberal education was now to be added to the practical training he had already acquired.

But what kind of a liberal education? He began a private course of study, partly because the only way to the two Universities for a

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Dissenter was through the hypocrisy of occasional conformity, and partly because the Universities did not really offer the curriculum he desired. This was to be modelled with evident intention on that prescribed nearly a century earlier in John Milton's letter to Samuel Hartlib, *Of Education*. The similarity between his career and that laid down by Milton is too close to be dismissed as mere coincidence; the only difference was that Hollis's circumstances caused him to begin somewhat later in life. His formal studies as well as his subsequent activities were directed with extraordinary fidelity to Milton's plan, which Hollis always referred to as a 'MASTER tract', while he lost no opportunity to point out that Milton had 'exhausted' the subject 'in one single sheet'. Bibliographers will recall that the first edition does indeed occupy the eight pages of one quarto sheet. Hollis knew it well, and it was in his personal library.¹ He heartily approved the aim of such an education: to fit 'a man to perform justly, skilfully, and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war'. 'Magnanimity' became another of Hollis's watchwords.

In addition to the scholastic pursuits advocated by Milton, Hollis engaged all his life in fencing and riding for exercise, and followed the injunction that one's diet should be 'plain, healthful, and moderate'. Apart from those few pupils Milton himself had taught, one may doubt that anyone else ever followed the syllabus so faithfully.

His tutor was Dr John Ward (1679[?]–1758), Professor of Rhetoric at Gresham College, a learned man and distinguished teacher. Young Hollis received a thorough grounding in Latin and Greek and a familiarity with the classics as well as with natural science, together with a considerable proficiency in Italian – all in accordance with Milton's doctrine. He also developed a love of classical antiquities and a taste and eye for the fine arts that he cultivated for the rest of his life. Later, when on the Grand Tour, he wrote to his old teacher detailed accounts of the latest archaeological discoveries at Pompeii and Herculaneum, and sent him James Stuart's handwritten prospectus for the proposed visit to Greece that eventually resulted in the famous *Antiquities of Athens* (1762).²

In Thomas's eighteenth year his grandfather Nathaniel died, adding another considerable fortune to that already in trust. More than most

¹ In a set of four tract volumes, lot 934 in the Hollis–Disney sale, Sotheby, 1817.

² Letters written from Italy and elsewhere to John Ward are found in B.L. Add. MS. 6210, ff. 130, 139, 141, 143, 147–9, and Add. MS. 4443, f. 138. The prospectus for Stuart and Revett's *Antiquities* is in Add. MS. 6210, f. 135.

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young middle-class men of his day he could afford to enlarge his experience of the world, explore its possibilities, and follow without stint his chosen direction. His family background of strong Whigs and staunch Dissenters had formed in him powerful convictions about social responsibility and the importance of defending civil and religious freedom. The rest of his life testifies to his seriousness of purpose. Although he was generous with his ample means, his early commercial training made him a good manager; even his cousin Timothy Hollis, some years older and a man of business all his days, turned to Thomas for financial advice.

Again in accordance with Milton's precepts, his first venture into the larger world was to study the law by gaining admission to Lincoln's Inn, where in February 1740 he took up residence at No. 6, New Square.¹ Always thereafter he proudly denominated himself 'Thomas Hollis of Lincoln's Inn', but we do not know how seriously he contemplated a legal career, and he was never called to the Bar. Little documentation survives for his studies there. A volume that he later gave to Harvard had once belonged to one William Bohun of Lincoln's Inn, and in it Hollis noted that Bohun was a 'strenuous Advocate for civil & religious Liberty', adding that in 1742 he attended Bohun's private lectures on English law.² An extra mark of Hollis's respect was to inscribe in the book a favourite quotation from Petrarch, 'Che trae l'uom del Sepolcro, ed in vita il serba.'³

According to Miltonic doctrine, such studies were intended to prepare for public service. Without doubt Hollis was thereafter both attracted and repelled by the possibility of a career in the House of Commons – attracted because of the good he might do, and repelled because the distasteful path to election required the empty form of

¹ A chronology of Hollis's lodgings in London and Dorset may be helpful: 1735–February 1740, while studying with Dr John Ward, probably in the London home of his guardian, John Hollister; February 1740–19 July 1748, No. 6, New Square, Lincoln's Inn; then until some time in 1753, possibly April, touring the continent; 1753–23 January 1761, rooms in the house of Mrs Mott, Bedford Sreet, Covent Garden (terminated by a fire); briefly at the Old Hummums, Covent Garden (a combination Turkish bath, coffee house, and hotel) while searching for new quarters; 1 February 1761–July 1770, Piccadilly at the corner of John Street, a house leased from Mrs Leighton, and maintained as a *pied-à-terre* until his death, 1 January 1774. In Dorset he had no fixed residence, but stayed in the farmhouse, Urles Farm, parish of Corscombe, or in a suite of rooms in the Three Cups, Lyme Regis, as suited his convenience; meantime he continued to search for a permanent residence in the general neighbourhood. His *Diary* contains much evidence that he was hard to suit.

² The book is *Oratio Dominica* ed. John Chamberlayne (Amsterdam 1715); Harvard, *EC7.C3555.7150.

³ *Trionfi* 1.

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occasional conformity and most often led through rotten boroughs and bought electors. In later life he was several times offered safe seats. He always declined, as he also declined office in some of the learned and charitable societies to which he belonged, preferring to enact his chosen rôle as a private citizen without danger of compromising his principles. As he once wrote to one of his American friends, Edmund Quincy III, he lived the life of 'a sober, retired Person, without a by-view'.

Ironically enough, less than a year after Hollis died, his close friend and heir Thomas Brand (who, when he inherited, took the name Brand Hollis) was persuaded to stand for the small Wiltshire borough of Hindon, was betrayed by a political manager who gave unauthorized bribes, and was crucified by the Tory majority, most of whom had won their seats by exactly the same methods.¹ The manager escaped scot-free, but Brand Hollis was deprived of his seat, sent to King's Bench Prison for six months, and fined 1,000 marks, somewhat more than £650 – a brutal lesson for a naïve Dissenting Whig, and one that Thomas Hollis's own resolution enabled him to avoid. But it was principle, not fear, that governed Thomas Hollis's actions.

Hollis maintained residence in New Square for nearly ten years, and whatever his legal studies, he appears to have engaged in good works rather than the many dissolute activities open to young men of means in London. Among his benefactions was a generous subscription for the relief of veterans of the force sent against the uprising of 1745 in Scotland. The '45 seems to have made a great impression on him. He equipped himself with a pair of silver-mounted pistols in case the insurrection swept on to London; but more important than that, it probably planted the seeds of his one fixed and immovable illiberal belief, shared with Brand Hollis and with numerous of his friends among the Dissenting clergy: prejudice against the Roman Catholic Church, which he considered to be not so much a church as a government meddling with other governments. How strong his prejudice was may be seen from his inscription in the Harvard copy of Samuel Morland *The History of the Evangelical Churches of the Valleys of Piemont* (London 1658),²

¹ [John Disney] *Memoirs of Thomas Brand-Hollis* (London 1808), pp. 10–12.

² c 7866.58*. The massacre of the Waldensians took place on 24 April 1655. Hollis must also have known Milton's sonnet 'On the Late Massacre in Piemont'. Sir Samuel Morland carried Cromwell's formal protest (written by Milton) to the Duke of Savoy and brought back documentation of the atrocities, which he gave to the Cambridge University Library in 1658; see J. C. T. Oates *Cambridge University Library, a History from the Beginnings to the Copyright Act of Queen Anne* (Cambridge [1986]), pp. 283–8.

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a book adorned with graphic cuts of the martyrdom of Protestants at the hands of Roman Catholic troops:

Reader, Whomsoever thou mayest be that shalt peruse these lines, whether Pagan or Jew, Christian or Mohammedan or Sceptic, consider well the Doctrines, Practices, Massacres of the Papists; and, so long as the arm of Popery is uplifted against thee, so long be thine uplifted against Popery, in justice to thyself and to Mankind.

Of course his feelings were aggravated by the disabilities under which Dissenters laboured in England, which seemed less likely to be alleviated by governmental action than those of Catholics. But his anti-Catholic bias did not extend to individuals. He never forgot the kindness and hospitality he experienced in certain Roman Catholic establishments, notably the monastery at Catania in Sicily, and he liked, admired, and materially assisted many Catholic friends both in England and on the continent.

As soon as he reached his majority he began to acquire extensive farmland in Dorset. In this he was again following Milton's advice to engage in the practical study of agricultural science. Although most of his early and middle years were spent in London or abroad, he evidently took a direct part in the management of his farms. When his favourite old saddle-horse Hob, long retired from active service, had to be destroyed in 1766, Hollis noted that he had bred the animal at Urles Farm in the spring of 1748.¹ But until he retired from London in 1770, he had to leave the day-to-day supervision of his country properties and their farmers to a trusted steward, Peter Maber.

By the time of his death in 1774, Hollis owned about 3,000 acres in Dorset. Most of the land was bought from the distressed Earl of Pomfret (who had fled to France to escape the bailiffs) and lay in the parishes of Corscombe and Halstock, from fifteen to twenty miles from Lyme Regis, a town greatly admired by Hollis.² Towards the end of his life he tried unsuccessfully to find not only a suitable house for himself in Lyme but also one for the elder Pitt, a life-long sufferer from gout and other chronic ailments; Hollis thought the town unequalled for beauty of location and salubrious air. It may be why he chose to build an estate in Dorset, though the Hollis family must have been familiar with the county because Robert Thorner, brother-in-law of Thomas II and

¹ *Diary* 4 July 1766.

² B. L. Add. MS. 34733, f. 150, contains a letter from Hollis to James West concerning negotiations for the purchase, consummated in 1741. West (1704?–72) was a barrister then residing in Lincoln's Inn. He was a notable antiquarian and book collector, FRS, FSA, and a member of the Spalding Gentlemen's Society.