
Borderlines or Interfaces in the Life and Work of Robert Boyle (1627-1691): The authorship of Protestant and Papist revisited

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At least four borderlines or interfaces can be distinguished in the life and work of Robert Boyle, namely those of:

- a) The abrupt changes that occurred during his lifetime between a monarchical government to the commonwealth, followed by the restoration to a monarchical form of government in England and Ireland.
- b) The relatively slow transition from alchemy to chemistry that took place during the Seventeenth century.
- c) The division of his time between studies and publications in science and those on religious, moralistic and ethical topics; and,
- d) his position with regard to the division, within the Christian traditions, as between Protestant and Roman Catholic theology and practices.

The First Earl of Cork (1566-1643), Robert Boyle's father, was a very successful adventurer who prospered and made a vast fortune in the reign of Elizabeth the First, Queen of England and Ireland. He died in 1643 leaving Stalbridge Manor in Dorset and estates in Ireland in his will to Robert. Robert spent the early part of the Commonwealth Period (1649-1660) at Stalbridge (1645-1655) and the later part, from 1656 till well after the Restoration of the Monarchy, in the city of Oxford. Due to his sister Katherine's influential relationships with many in the parliamentary party, coupled with his own insulation from political influences during his "Grand Tour", Robert secured protection for both his English and his Irish Estates [1, 2].

Boyle lived at the time of the gradual transition of alchemy into a more rational based chemistry. He was, in his time, a leading exponent of practical and observational based science, although he made some alchemical excursions [3-5].

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During his working life Boyle divided his time on studies and writing activities between science and religious, moralistic and ethical topics [6]. The ratio of the numbers of his monograph publications in science to those on religious and moralistic topics is 30:10 [7]. It is only in recent times that much attention has been paid to his early, mainly non-scientific, writings, most of which were delayed in publication for many years. Others have remained available only in manuscript form until quite recent times, for example, that started in 1645, at Stalbridge, on "*The ARETOLOGY or Ethicall Elements of Robert Boyle*". This and his early published and unpublished essays are discussed and the various items on "Ethics" in the "Boyle Papers" [8, 9] were assembled by Harwood [10] in 1991. Those for his planned treatise, "*Observations upon the causes and Pretences<and Remedies> of Atheisme*", were very recently brought together by MacIntosh [11].

As noted in Bishop Burnet's sermon at Boyle's funeral, Boyle throughout his life remained an Anglican but exhibited a marked degree of religious toleration. "He was constant to the Church; and went to no separated Assemblies, how charitably soever he might think of their Persons, and how plentifully soever he might have relived their Necessities" [12, 13]. The view that he was seriously anti-Roman Catholic rests on the authorship of a small anonymous tract "*Reasons why a Protestant should not turn Papist: or Protestant Prejudices against the Roman Catholic Religion....*" [14] (see fig. I), this tract is often referred to by its short title, "*Protestant and Papist*". It has in the past, and is by some still, attributed to Robert Boyle. The available evidence with regard to the authorship of this tract is herein revisited. Establishment of the authorship of this tract is regarded as critical to the formation of a fair and balanced view of a key and major aspect of Boyle's work and of his religious outlook on life.

The authorship of Protestant and Papist revisited

It is appropriate, in view of the recent publication of a new edition of *The Works of Robert Boyle* [15] and its omission of probably the most contentious of the anonymous writings, *Protestant and Papist*, which has been frequently attributed to Robert Boyle. As noted by Fulton [7] "this anonymous tract is not included in the earlier collected editions of Boyle's works [16(a), 16(b)] nor was it mentioned in the early biographies of Boulton [17], Birch [18] or Masson [19] or in the *Term Catalogues*". It was assigned to him by Halkett and Laing [20] citing the British Museum Catalogue, but no evidence was given. It is also attributed to Robert Boyle in the current British Library Catalogue and in the web-catalogue of digital facsimile books, "EEBO", "Early English Books Online".

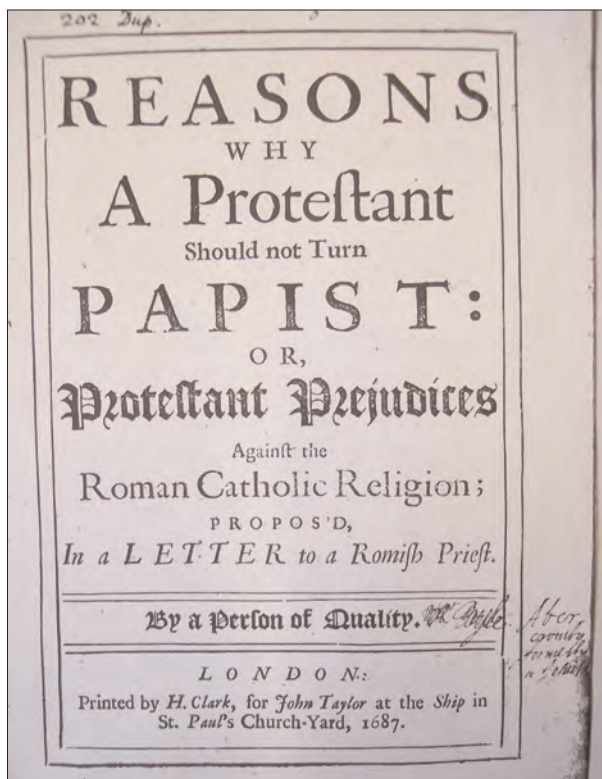


Figure 1. Title page *Protestant and Papist*, corrected version of the first edition, Fulton XXXIII, 175A.

Protestant and Papist [14] was discussed at length by More [21]. He cited the entry in the first edition of Fulton's *Biography of the Honourable Robert Boyle* [7a] and recorded Fulton's cautious view, expressed to him in a letter, cited in a footnote to his chapter on "Boyle and Anglican Theology"[21(a)]. However, he then proceeded to discuss the tract as if he were convinced it was by Boyle. Agassi [22] leaned towards the view that *Protestant and Papist* was by Boyle but concluded that it was "more political than theological in nature as well as in thrust; and the view that it is Boyle's is not well founded but is thus far unchallenged" [22(a)]. Maddison [1], in his detailed biography

of Boyle, and Jacob [23] have avoided the issue by omitting all mention of the tract.

The challenge of the authorship of the tract was taken up by Davis [24], who reviewed all the other anonymous writings now ascribed to Boyle, before discussing in detail the tract, *Protestant and Papist* [14]. Davis then summarised all the evidence against the tract being by Boyle, namely its style, that only one copy has been located with a contemporaneous attribution to Boyle, the significant inconsistency between the anti-Catholic views expressed in the tract as compared to the ecumenical attitudes reflected in Boyle's will and the negative evidence based on extensive study of the Boyle Papers at the Royal Society. For, although these papers contain copies of several anti-Catholic writings by others, not even a scrap from a draft of *Protestant and Catholic* has been found, nor has any document related to it been located [24(a)]. This finding increases in significance when looked at along-

side the fact that a few pages or drafts and/or closely related documents have been located for every single authentic Boyle text published after 1667[15(a)]. Additionally, the tract does not appear in the catalogues of Boyle's theological writings published under his auspices in the last years of his life, in contrast to all works known to be by him [15(b)].

Davis then raised the question, "If Boyle did not write it, then who did?" [24 (a)]. A good case was put forward for the author to be David Abercromby. The main evidence being the contemporary attribution given by a Scottish Divine, Lawrence Charteris, in "A Short Account of Scots Divines" published in James Maidment's *Catalogues of Scottish Writers* [25]. Abercromby was a recipient of Boyle's patronage in the 1680's and translated five of Boyle's books into Latin. The new edition of *The Works of Robert Boyle* [15] has excluded the tract on the basis of the arguments that it was not by Boyle and the cited evidence in favour of Abercromby being the author.

Since the attribution by Davis of the tract, *Protestant and Papist* to Abercromby, Tumbleson [26, 27] has reasserted its attribution to Robert Boyle. His argument that Boyle wrote the tract [26(a)] is that the evolution of thought that occurs between Boyle's *Excellency of Theology* [28] and *Protestant and Papist* [12] parallels that between William Sherlock's *A Papist not Misrepresented by Protestants* [29] and Sherlock's later tract, *A Vindication of Some Protestant Principles* [30]. He also comments, "what is remarkable about Boyle's argument is how unremarkable it is; he covers the same ground in the same terms as his fellow Anglicans". However, in the reference to the tract he seems to be curiously unsure, citing [R. Boyle?] as author, he also states that "the exact provenance of this tract is less important than that the attitude towards Catholicism of this pamphlet is far from alien to the world views implicit in Boyle's oeuvre"[27(a)]. This view is not reasonable. The authorship of this or of similar tracts is of major importance. It is not acceptable to impute views to Boyle, or any other author, dead or living, in the absence of proof.

Tumbleson [27(a)] criticised Davis [24] for his attribution of the tract to Abercromby on two grounds. Firstly, with regard to the value of the contemporary attribution by Charteris to Abercromby, in particular the significance, or truth, that Charteris "may have known Abercromby personally". Secondly he says, "That *Protesant and Papist* resembles other anti-Catholic writings by Abercromby in some respects does not support Davis's case" [27(a)]. The first objection is not convincing in that it matters not that Charteris "may have known Abercromby personally". The real issue is, did he or did he not know what Abercromby had, or had not, written? It is also hard to give any credence to the second criticism by

Tumbleson, when he has used the same “comparison of texts approach” to support the view that the tract was by Boyle [26(a)].

Davis searched carefully for copies of the tract [24(b)] with contemporaneous annotations naming possible authors, but found none that had been attributed to David Abercromby. Just such a copy has now come to light, which supports the view that Abercromby was its author. It is a copy of the corrected issue and is annotated, twice on the title page, both in an early hand and ink. Alongside “By a Person of Quality” is written “R. Boyle”, which has been overwritten “Mr. David” and “Abercromby formerly a Jesuit” is close by, on clear space in the margin (see figure II).

Consideration of the publisher, John Taylor, if he had worked exclusively for Boyle, or for Abercromby would have been helpful to settle the authorship question. However, Taylor did not work exclusively for either, as sight of the publisher’s catalogue proves. In the catalogue, at the rear of the tract, we find among the 10 items listed, Boyle’s *Vulgarly Receiv’d Notion of Nature* [31-33], *Martyrdom of Theodora* [34] by a Person of Honour (now accepted as by Boyle) and *Academia Scientiarum* [35] by D. Abercromby.

Enquiries made at Lambeth Palace Library and also at Stationer’s Hall failed to yield any records of the *Imprimatur*, granted by the Archbishop of Canterbury, July 9th. 1687. Records, which, if available, might have shed light as to the authorship of the tract.

In addition to the style within the written text, it is perhaps relevant to consider the layout and the structure of the tract. When compared with all the anonymous works now attributed to Boyle, *Protestant and Papist* [14] is the only work in this group, with no advertisement to the reader, no preface and with a table of contents at the front of the volume. The only two of the anonymous works, now known to be by Boyle, *Martyrdom of Theodora* [34], *The Christian Virtuoso* [36] which have contents (or Heads of the discourse) are both placed at the end of each text. These three observations, on the structure, on the layout, together with the existence of an early-inscribed attribution to Abercromby on a copy of the tract, further support the view that the tract was not written by Robert Boyle, but by David Abercromby.

The opinion that Boyle did not have a sufficiently narrow minded sectarian outlook to have been able to write *Protestant and Papist*, is supported by comments on, and, the records of, his relationships with non-Anglicans. In addition to what he said in the funeral sermon, Bishop Burnet wrote of Boyle in his “Rough Draft of my Life” [37] as follows, “he studied the Scripture with great application and prac-

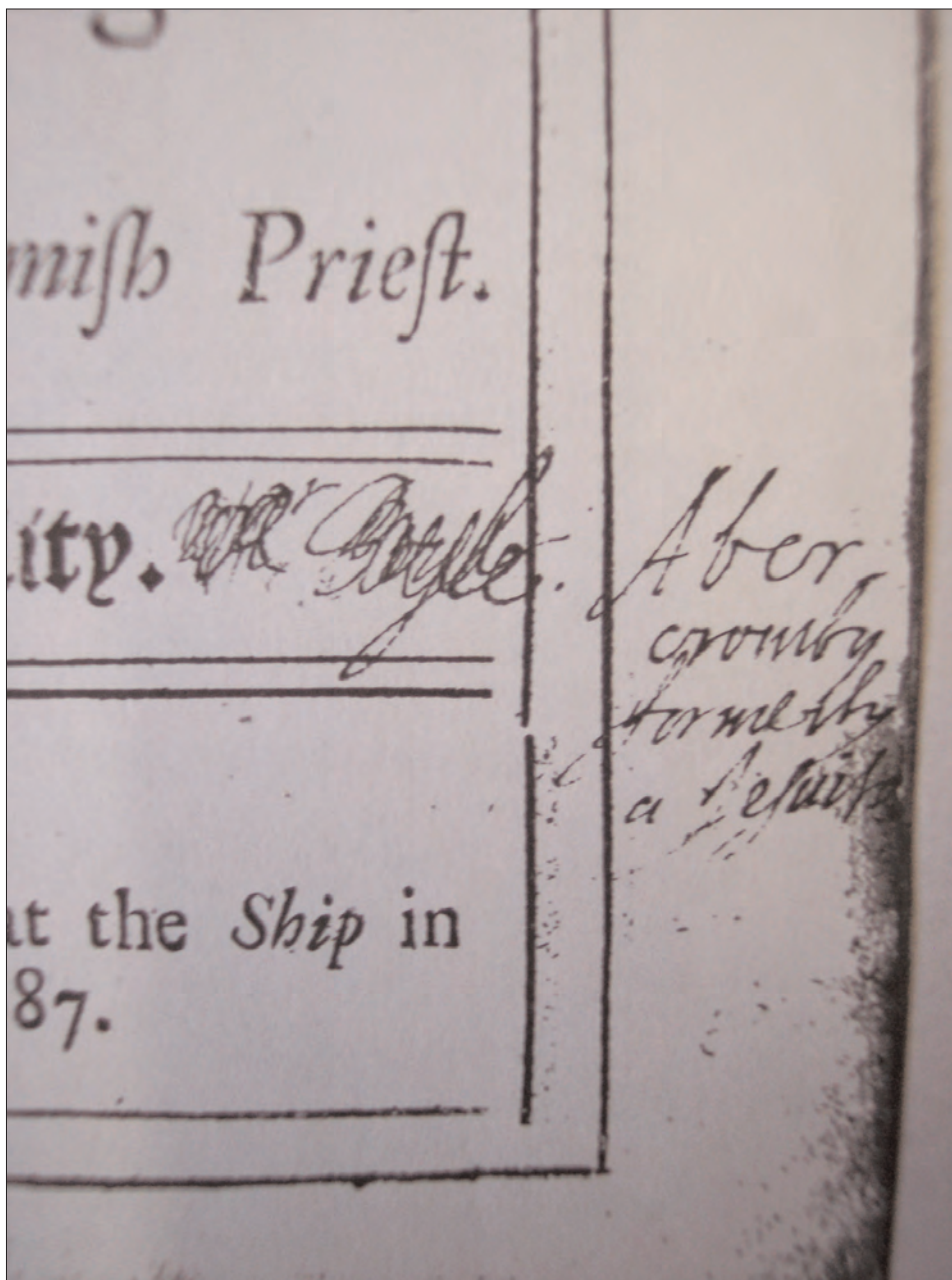


Figure 2. Annotation attributing the authorship of *Protestant and Papist* to David Abercromby. (From collection of D. Thorburn Burns).

ticed universall love and goodnes in the greatest extent possible, and was a great promoter of love and charity among men and a declared enemy to all bitterness and most particularly to all persecution on account of religion”.

Two examples from the extreme ends of the Judaic-Christian spectrum illustrate well Burnet’s view as to Boyle’s lack of religious bigotry. First, when Boyle was in the Netherlands, February-April 1648, he visited Menasseh ben Israel whom he regarded as “the Greatest Rabbi of his Age”, and mentioned him several times in his works [1(a)]. A second and important example, is Boyle’s friendship with the Italian, Count Lorenzo Magalotti, who was secretary to Cosmo III during his London visit 1667-1668. When Magalotti became ill Boyle visited him and sat by his bedside for two or three hours daily [38]. Afterwards they kept in touch and it is clear from Magalotti’s letter, dated Spring 1672 [39], that they had a mutual regard one for the other. The letter also contains a discussion of Boyle religious tract *Seraphic Love* [40] as well as reasons as to why Boyle should turn to Rome.

Conclusions

Consideration of the structure and layout of *Protestant and Papist*, the documented details of Boyle’s relationships and friendships with people across the whole Judaic-Christian spectrum which demonstrate his lack of religious bigotry, and the existence of a copy with an early inscribed attribution to David Abercromby, support further, Davis’ view that the tract was written by David Abercromby and not by Robert Boyle.

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