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WAS ROBERT HALDANE (1764–1842) AMONG THE ILLUMINATI?

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In his 2017 book, *The Square and the Tower*, Stanford historian Niall Ferguson opened with a discussion of that most notable of conspiracy theories, the mysterious Illuminati.¹ With the rise of conspiracy theorists such as QAnon,² Ferguson's book remains relevant with each passing year. His work continued an exploration of conspiracy theory influences which Richard Hofstadter described in 1964 as 'the paranoid style.'³ Ferguson pointed out that the renowned physicist John Robison (1739–1805), had published a book that attempted to expose the infiltration of secret cabals into European society in order to facilitate its overthrow.⁴ The shadow of conspiracy was a fixation for many back then as it is today.

Ferguson has made the case that the French Revolution was not caused by secret societies. However, Ferguson claimed, 'there were strong incentives to exaggerate the scale and the malignancy of the Illuminati.'⁵ The Illuminati originally had been a small collection of German intellectuals founded in 1776 by Adam Weishaupt.⁶ This 'Bavarian Illuminati' was notable for how quickly it ended. The secret nature of these societies created speculation about their size, with little public evidence. The idea that the Illuminati were the catalyst for the French Revolution was a claim that, according to Ferguson, 'cannot withstand even casual scrutiny.'⁷ Yet the conspiracy theories prove very resilient. As Ferguson pointed out:

¹ Ferguson, *The Square and the Tower* (New York: Penguin, 2017), p. 3.

² QAnon is an online movement of multiple accounts which promote conspiracy theories about the US government and society. See Zuckerman, 'QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal.' *Journal of Design and Science*, 2019.

³ See Richard Hofstadter, 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics,' *Harpers Magazine*, November, 1964.

⁴ John Robison, *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies* (Philadelphia: Dobson and Cobbett, 1798).

⁵ Ferguson, *The Square and the Tower*, p. 53.

⁶ See the doctoral thesis of Vernon Stauffer, *New England and the Bavarian Illuminati* (PhD diss., Columbia University, New York, 1918), pp. 182-85. Stauffer traces the assumed influence of the movement as undermining New England puritan institutions by the late eighteenth century.

⁷ Ferguson, *The Square and the Tower*, p. 54.

The myth of the Illuminati has persisted down to the present day [...] What is harder to explain is the widespread belief that the Illuminati really exist and are as powerful today as their founder intended them to be. There are, to be sure, a number of websites purporting to represent the Illuminati, but none is very professional-looking.⁸

The long shelf-life of conspiracy theory claims make the claimant exceedingly influential beyond their own context and time period. The claims, when they become allegations, tend to resist attempts to dismiss them. In fact, John Robison's discovery of the Illuminati theory still produces citations by historians 200 years later. Yet even in Robison's immediate wake, men like Robert Haldane (1764–1842), the Scottish Evangelical, could not escape the guilt by association which followed them in a paranoid style all its own.

Robert Haldane and his brother James were known widely after their conversions for participating in evangelistic enterprises.⁹ Robert was the organizer and funder of these projects, and James was the primary preacher. Robert Haldane became caught up in the web of controversy soon after his conversion when he sought to fund a missionary effort to India in imitation of William Carey. After supporting a home mission lead by laymen, Haldane would help found and then abandon the Congregational churches in Scotland. Later he influenced the embryo of the *Réveil* in Geneva beginning in late 1816. Throughout his career controversy followed him but the conspiracy theory charge was one of the earliest.

THE CONSPIRACY THEORIST

To draw a caricature of the conspiracy theorist, the outlines would show someone who was mentally unstable and lacking all credibility. John Robison was not like that. His career spanned from military service in Quebec and Jamaica to scientific service in Russia, even receiving a pension from the Empress Catherine in 1800.¹⁰ David B. Wilson observed

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ For an overview of the Haldane brothers' careers, see Kenneth J. Stewart, *Restoring the Reformation: British Evangelicalism and the Francophone Réveil 1816–1849* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2006).

¹⁰ See John Playfair, 'Biographical Account of the late John Robison' in *Works*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: Constable, 1822), pp. 121–80.

that Robison was a key figure in 'Enlightenment Scotland' and that he 'defined a particularly Scottish approach to natural philosophy'.¹¹

His work as a physicist and mathematician lent credibility to his ventures into the realm of conspiracy theories. Timothy Dwight (1752–1817) — then president of Yale — published an addendum to his 1801 sermon where he defended the reliability of Robison.¹² Influenced by the claims of Robison, Dwight warned of the encroaching conspiracy:

It ought by no means to be forgotten, that Infidelity has been formed into a regular school in which, with unprecedented efforts, the young, the ingenious, the unwary, and the licentious, have through a series of solemn gradations, been ensnared, initiated, and entangled, beyond hope, or wish to escape.¹³

It may be debated whether Robison had lost the capacity for precision in old age which he displayed in his early career. Hofstadter argued, 'Robison seems to have made his work as factual as he could, but when he came to estimating the moral character and the political influence of Illuminism, he made the characteristic paranoid leap into fantasy'.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Robison was respected enough on both sides of the Atlantic that his concerns about the Illuminati were readily accepted among the influential leaders in society.¹⁵

The welcome reception of Robison's views meant that anyone who had been connected by Robison to the conspiracy became naturally tainted by the association. This political guilt could follow a person even if there was a lack of evidence, or whether at an essential level a change of heart had taken place.

¹¹ David B. Wilson, 'Enlightenment Scotland's Philosophico-Chemical Physics' in *Between Leibniz, Newton, and Kant*, ed. by W. Lefèvre, Boston Studies in the Philosophy and History of Science, vol. 220 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2001).

¹² Dwight, *A Discourse on Some Events of the Last Century* (New Haven: Ezra Read, 1801), p. 53.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁴ Hofstadter, 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics', *Harpers Magazine*, November, 1964.

¹⁵ There is record of correspondence between G.W. Snyder and George Washington regarding Robison's theories. Washington, in his October 27, 1798 reply to Taylor said, 'It was not my intention to doubt that, the Doctrines of the Illuminati, and principles of Jacobinism had not spread in the United States.' See *The Papers of George Washington*, Retirement Series, vol. 2, *2 January 1798–15 September 1798*, ed. by W. W. Abbot (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), pp. 554–57.

THE MISSIONARY CANDIDATE

One of the figures slandered by Robison's conspiracy theories was the Christian philanthropist, Robert Haldane (1764–1842).¹⁶ Haldane was from the Scottish upper class yet had taken great interest in the principles of social justice which the French Revolution promoted. When Haldane was converted to evangelical faith in 1795, the memory of his radical sympathies remained among his contemporaries.

By the time of Robison's writing of *Proofs of Conspiracy* in 1798, Robert Haldane had become, along with his brother James, a leading figure among the Evangelicals of Scotland. Robert had been a sailor in the British navy — even having fought the French — yet the idealism of the Revolution had stirred his conscience after he had left the military. Even as his brother James had been awakened to evangelical faith, Robert was still found obsessing about politics, with the French Revolution as his favorite topic.¹⁷ Haldane recalled, 'I rejoiced in this experiment that was making in France of the construction of a Government at once from its foundation upon a regular plan, which Hume, in his Essays, speaks of as an event so much to be desired.'¹⁸ On July 1, 1794, Robert went so far as to make a public speech which condemned the aristocracy's plan to arm local volunteers for military service in the wars against France. The speech was long remembered after his conversion and created 'many enemies.'¹⁹

Yet as Robert's mind was stirred with the thought of revolutionary *social* change, he was also being pressed with the need for *spiritual* change in his own life. Although he had the immediate witness of many ministers, 'when Christianity forced itself on his notice,' as his biographer put it, 'he determined to survey it in all its bearings.'²⁰

Missionary ideals quickly took hold of the newly converted Haldane. The example of William Carey (1761–1864) made a deep impression on the aristocrat:

¹⁶ The first biography of Robert Haldane and his brother, James came from the latter's son, Alexander, published as, *Memoirs of the Lives of Robert Haldane of Airthrey, and of His Brother, James Alexander Haldane* (Edinburgh: Whyte, 1852).

¹⁷ Haldane, *Memoirs*, p. 85.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87. Haldane may have referred to David Hume's essays, published in multiple editions, specifically, 'That Politics may be reduced to a Science' or 'Of the First Principles of Government', both contained in *Essays, Moral, and Political* (Edinburgh: Kincaid, 1741).

¹⁹ Haldane, *Memoirs*, p. 90.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

I had seen the accounts of the Baptist Mission in Bengal, which pointed out both the condition of the natives as destitute of the Gospel, and also the wide, promising field then opened for the exertions of Christians. A strong desire occupied my mind to engage in the honorable service. The object was of such magnitude that compared with it, the affairs of time appeared to sink into nothing, and no sacrifice seemed too great in order to its attainment.²¹

From Haldane's own description, his sentiments about political lobbying had changed, and he was taken up with spiritual concerns and the cause of a heavenly kingdom. This change led him to plan the sale of his trophy estate, Airthrey (now owned by the University of Stirling). The proceeds of the sale would fund Haldane's own plan to develop a missionary enterprise that would go to India, following in Carey's footsteps.

Politics would follow Haldane as he walked this new path of Christian discipleship. In order for Haldane to develop his full-orbed missionary venture (including a printing press)²² he had to apply to the British government for approval. Specifically, he had to get permission from the East India Company which held the exclusive charter for India.

Although Haldane's plans were supported by Evangelicals like William Wilberforce (1759–1833) in the halls of political power, the memory of Haldane's 'radical' pre-conversion speech of 1794 continued to follow him. Haldane reached out to Mr. Dundas (Lord Melville) who was the Chief Secretary of State on September 21, 1796 to seek permission for the Indian mission. Haldane wrote:

Whatever fear may be expressed with regard to the political sentiments of any of us, as making it dangerous to send such persons to India, will not apply here. As citizens of this country we conceive we have a right and we esteem it a duty, to speak freely our sentiments about Government. As missionaries abroad we have no such business. Our mouths on that subject will be sealed for ever, when we devote ourselves to preach only the Gospel of Jesus Christ and what it contains in a foreign land.²³

In another letter to Melville (Sept 30, 1796), Haldane reiterated his spiritual view of the matter: 'we go with the direct view, not to enrich ourselves, but to save the souls of men.'²⁴ Wilberforce expressed the lingering *political* view taken of Haldane and his mission, saying, 'In this he would

²¹ Ibid., p. 99.

²² Haldane, *Memoirs*, p. 101. Carey had the idea of printing a Bengali New Testament in 1795. See John Clark Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman, and Ward*. Vol. I (London: Longman, 1859), p. 73.

²³ Haldane, *Memoirs*, p. 107.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 108.

have succeeded if their extreme political opinions had not alarmed the Government.²⁵ Haldane's influential social status, combined with his former revolutionary sympathies and a single anti-war speech had left his civic reputation permanently scarred.²⁶

SUSPICION

When the British government was suspicious of Robert Haldane, we can see that others in the general public could adopt their opinion. The concerned scientist, John Robison accused Haldane of wanting to export the principles of the French revolution to British possessions in India under the cover of missionary work. He made the charges in print, in his widely read *Proofs of Conspiracy*. Although Haldane had come up with a plan for evangelizing work in India as the zealous product of his conversion, Robison didn't buy it. Robison did not name Haldane, but it was clear whom he intended. He said:

A very eminent [advocate of Joseph Priestley] once said in company a few days ago that 'he would willingly wade to the knees in blood to overturn the establishment of the Kirk of Scotland.' I understand that he proposes to go to India, and there to preach Christianity to the natives. Let me beseech him to recollect that among us Christianity is still considered a gospel of peace, and that it strongly dissuades us from bathing our feet in blood.²⁷

According to Robison's view, Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) was dangerous because he had supported the ideas of the French Revolution.²⁸ To the slander of this connection with Priestley, Haldane affirmed his non-violent intentions in Robison's own language saying, 'Christianity is still considered as the gospel of peace, and that it strongly dissuades us from bathing our feet in blood.'²⁹ By this point, Haldane's theology was soundly orthodox, and he was unsympathetic to Joseph Priestley who had also helped found the non-trinitarian Unitarian denomination. But Haldane had to continue to protest, saying 'in language sufficiently strong, that it was not politics I had in view when I wished to place myself, my family,

²⁵ Ibid., p. 110.

²⁶ Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman, and Ward*, p. 73.

²⁷ Robison, *Proofs of Conspiracy*, p. 370.

²⁸ On Priestley see his autobiographical, *Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley* (London: Allenson, 1904) reprint of 1809 edition.

²⁹ Haldane, *Memoirs*, p. 196. Letter to Robison No. 1, September 21st, 1797.

and property entirely under the power of a Government which is so strong as that in India.³⁰

Haldane took issue with Robison ascribing a false motive to his missionary desires. Haldane further clarified that he had 'never been a Freemason and knew nothing of the Illuminati.'³¹ Robison in turn offered that if Haldane demanded 'satisfaction' (in a duel), that he would be obliged to accept! In spite of all this, Haldane's awakened Christian faith caused him to repeat his espousal of nonretaliation, saying, 'Christianity, which I consider as the gospel of peace, has taught me that it would be no satisfaction to bathe either my feet or my hands in your blood.'³²

FULLER ON 'ASCENDENCY IN GOVERNMENT'

The English Baptist pastor Andrew Fuller (1754–1815) offered his comment on the situation in his 1801 sermon on Numbers 14:8.³³ In context, Fuller wished to make clear that the gospel should not be mixed with political pragmatism. He said:

The object which we pursue must be simply the cause of God, unmixed with worldly policy, or party interest. It has been insinuated that, under the colour of disseminating evangelical doctrine, we seek to gain over the common people, and so to obtain, it should seem, an ascendancy in government. If it be so, we may be assured the Lord will take no delight in us.³⁴

In a footnote to the published version of the sermon, Fuller stated that the pursuit of 'ascendancy in government' that he referred to in the sermon was part of the charge made against Haldane. Fuller wrote:

To this effect were the insinuations of Professor Robison, concerning the efforts of Mr. Robert Haldane and his friends, in a proposed mission to Hindustan. The modest and dignified manner in which that gentleman repelled

³⁰ Haldane, *Memoirs*, p. 111.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 198.

³³ Andrew Fuller, Sermon: *God's Appropriation of Our Labours Necessary to the Hope of Success (Numbers 14:8)* Preached in 1801, in *The Complete Works of Rev. Andrew Fuller*, ed. by Joseph Belcher (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1845), p. 183.

³⁴ Fuller, *God's Appropriation*, p. 188. The pamphlet was published as Haldane, *Address to the Public, Concerning Political Opinions and Plans Lately Adopted to Promote Religion in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Ritchie, 1800).

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the accusation, and even forced his accuser to retract it, may be seen in his late excellent pamphlet on that subject.³⁵

From the interactions of John Robison and Robert Haldane it appears that the conspiracy theorist and the prospective missionary had a significant misunderstanding. Was Robert Haldane among the Illuminati? Robison was surely mistaken and Andrew Fuller clearly vindicated Robert Haldane in the controversy.

What is also clear is that the taint of conspiracy can follow a person after they have been converted to Christ. Past political affiliations, strong opinions or known sympathies with discredited theories can be remembered long after. In such instances, the dramatic change of Christian conversion goes under-appreciated. Sadly, even in the Christian community there can be a lack forgiveness when it comes to certain sins of the past. Although David Bebbington has argued for conversionism as part of his interpretative quadrilateral for Evangelicalism, some observers view Christian conversion with suspicion.³⁶ In the case of Haldane, he was misunderstood often throughout his Christian life, yet was repeatedly induced to explain his new governing philosophy that trumped all others, namely evangelical faith in Jesus Christ. It was this commitment that led him to fund missions, ministers and churches from Scotland to Switzerland, including joining in the Genevan R veil (1816–1817).

What will future historians of the 2020s say about the spread of conspiracy theories among Evangelicals? Will Evangelicalism be tainted by the association or will conversionism be enough to let the follies of the past lie forgotten?

³⁵ Fuller, *God's Appropriation*, p. 188.

³⁶ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 17.