

Collaboration will lead to Greater Knowledge of Dissenting Academies



Cheshunt College, Herts (n.d.)
Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of Dr Williams's Library

The earliest dissenting academies were established after the Restoration as a result of the 1662 Act of Uniformity. Their main purpose was to prepare candidates for the ministry, but many educated lay students as well. They were intended to provide Protestant students dissenting from the Church of England and therefore mostly excluded by their religious beliefs from Oxford and Cambridge with a similar higher education. They played a significant role in ministerial and lay education from the late 17th to the mid-19th centuries, when the founding of London and provincial universities and the removal of religious tests at Oxford and Cambridge made them largely redundant as places of higher education. Among those educated at dissenting academies were three archbishops, two bishops, leading politicians, and well known writers, thinkers and ministers. The academies' impact on British life was far greater than merely maintaining an educated dissenting ministry. However, new scholarship on Oxford, Cambridge and the Scottish universities has not been matched by work on the academies - an absence particularly surprising given the extensive availability of archival material. In 2008 Professor Knud Haakonssen led a research network funded by the Religion and Society Programme to help redress this situation.

The network's aim was to prepare and assist the large-scale Dissenting Academies Project, directed by Professor Isabel Rivers (Queen Mary, London), Dr Richard Whatmore (University of Sussex), Dr David Wykes (Dr Williams's Library) and, until 2011, Professor Haakonssen. This was established to create a substantial multi-authored volume: *The History of the Dissenting Academies in the British Isles from 1660 to 1860* to be published by Cambridge University Press (CUP) and an elaborate web site comprising two substantial databases (<http://www.english.qmul.ac.uk/drwilliams/portal.html>). To identify and bring together contributors, develop the book and the related databases the network comprised two workshops involving scholars from Canada and France, as well as the UK, and representing a diverse range of subjects: Theology, Religious Studies, English Literature, History of Mathematics, Philosophy and Economics, and Librarianship. During the life of the network, post-doctoral fellows Dr Simon Dixon and Dr Inga Volmer were recruited to work on the archival material and associated data bases, funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

Workshop 1 focused on identifying potential contributors to the book and plans for the comprehensive databases for the academies, their students, tutors and curricula. It benefitted greatly from the participation of CUP executive director Richard Fisher. Workshop 2 then brought together 24 out of the 31/32 contributors to the CUP volume. It involved presentations from the individual contributors and review of the post-doctoral fellows' databases which they had begun to establish in the interim. The workshops confirmed the overwhelming need for a comprehensive new history of the Dissenting Academies and led to the recruitment of a very distinguished international group of contributors to the *History* and participants in the project as a whole, providing ample evidence of both the cultural timeliness and scholarly urgency of the project, which will tell us much about religion, education, state and society.

Find out more...

- Isabel Rivers: <http://www.english.qmul.ac.uk/drwilliams/people/rivers.html>
- Keep an eye out for the *History of the Dissenting Academies in the British Isles, 1660-1860* to be published by CUP in 2014.
- Visit the websites of the two institutions which co-founded the Dissenting Academies Project: Dr Williams's Centre for Dissenting Studies: <http://www.english.qmul.ac.uk/drwilliams/academies.html> and the Sussex Centre for Intellectual History: <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/cih/>

You might also be interested in...

- Listening to the Dissenting Academies Project's co-directors Isabel Rivers and David Wykes discussing their collaborative studentship also funded by the Religion and Society Programme along with the project's doctoral student Mark Burden who also participated in the Network's first workshop: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/dr_williams_s_library_discussion
- Reading about the findings from this studentship: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/anxiety_about_religious_academies_is_nothing_new
- Workshop participant David Bebbington's research network funded by Religion and Society: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2012_06/1340095883_Bebbington_Phase_1_Network_Block.pdf

Project Details

Award Title

The History of the Dissenting Academies in the British Isles 1660-1860

Team

Principal Investigator: Prof Knud Haakonssen

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Arts & Humanities
Research Council



Research Partners

Professor Isabel Rivers (Queen Mary, London), Dr Richard Whatmore (University of Sussex), Dr David Wykes (Director, Dr Williams's Library)

Award Type

Phase 1 Network & Workshop Grant

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