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"A Prodigious Execution": The Confessional Politics of Robert Paltock's *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins*

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The only extant eighteenth-century review of Robert Paltock's *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins, a Cornish Man* (1750) compares the novel to both *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), claiming that Paltock attempts to blend qualities of those two books but fails because there is "no very natural conjunction" between them.¹ The reviewer's judgment, however, seems excessively harsh—in fact, positioning *Peter Wilkins* between these two novels makes a great deal of sense. Like *Crusoe*, *Peter Wilkins* features a reasonable, Whiggish male protagonist who, through labor and solitude, undergoes a spiritual transformation while stranded on a deserted island. What is more, after living on the island a number of years, Peter encounters a nation of natives inhabiting the islands surrounding his own and attempts to convert and civilize them. The second half of the novel diverges greatly from Crusoe's topical realism, depicting Peter's encounters with an island nation of flying people. Indeed, the fantastic nature of the flying islanders is less reminiscent of Crusoe's cannibals than of Gulliver's Lilliputians, Brobdingnagians, and Houyhnhnms.

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Peter describes these fantastic flying people in the dispassionate tone of both *Gulliver's Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe*, though the narration lacks the obviously sardonic undercurrent of the former or the sense of plausibility of the latter. That the social commentary in *Peter Wilkins* is less immediately apparent than the social commentary offered in *Gulliver's Travels* is, no doubt, the source of the reviewer's consternation and of what he terms the text's "unmeaning extravagancies."2

The reviewer's withering judgment shows little forbearance for the novel, which he reads as nothing more than escapist, fantasy trash. Suggestively, nearly all of *Peter Wilkins*'s critics have constructed the novel in similar, if less hostile, terms as a problematic work noteworthy for its precocious imagination and little else.3 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for instance, remarks that if he were to write a shipwreck novel, he "would try the marvelous line of *Peter Wilkins* . . . rather than the real fiction of *Robinson Crusoe*."4 When we consider that both novels are stylistically realist, Coleridge's critique, like the critiques of nearly all of the novel's critical advocates, values the novel as a work of pure fantasy disengaged from its historical context.5 Paul Baines makes an analogous claim that "it is not hard to see 'fantasy' as the determining concept of the book," arguing that aspects of *Peter Wilkins* that might otherwise reference exigent political and social issues, like Peter's efforts to unify the flying-islanders' nation, reflect the science-fictional struggle between "technological powers and imaginative fantasy."6 }

2. Ibid.


5. Nora Crook's "Peter Wilkins: A Romantic Cult Book," in *Reviewing Romanticism*, ed. Philip W. Martin and Robin Jarvis (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), 86–98, takes up Coleridge's assessment of the novel in her discussion of the importance of *Peter Wilkins* for Romantic writers. Crook is primarily interested in expanding the novel's current readership: "my chief hope is that anyone persuaded by [my] chapter to read *Peter Wilkins* will simply find it a pleasure" (95).

have been especially strong proponents of this apolitical reading of the text. Christopher Bentley, for instance, argues that "the account of court life and political intrigues may . . . possibly contain some covert allusions to contemporary Europe; but Paltock is interested in his creations for themselves, not as vehicles of satire, and Swift's major purpose is scarcely discernible here."\(^7\) James Grantham Turner, \textit{Peter Wilkins}'s most recent editor, goes one step further than his predecessor, maintaining that the presence of allusions to the novel's political context—like its deployment of "Georgetti" to name the flying-people's king—are false leads that send the reader in "search for inappropriate political allegory."\(^8\)

Most probably, these judgments are at least partially an outcome of the utter dearth of verifiable biographical information detailing Paltock's life and affiliations, a problem exacerbated by the fact that Paltock's authorship was not established until 1802, well after his death.\(^9\) The difficulties posed by such a sparse biography cannot be underestimated. After all, how would our reading of Gulliver's devotion to the Houyhnhnms change if we did not have as background a clear understanding of Swift's utter disdain for enthusiasm? In this article, I reassess Paltock's novel, arguing that \textit{Peter Wilkins} is deeply engaged with its own historical context, positioning itself as a work of political allegory that intentionally deploys anti-Jacobite history and rhetoric to forward an argument for the unification of the Three Kingdoms—England, Scotland, and Ireland—as a single Protestant nation. The novel works toward this polemical end by first confronting the reader with an overtly anti-Catholic narrative of British history—linking the parents of the novel's protagonist, Peter, with victims of James II's authoritarian Catholic rule—and then reenacting the 1745 Jacobite rebellion in the nation of the flying islanders.

\(^7\) Christopher Bentley, introduction to \textit{The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), xi.
\(^8\) James Grantham Turner, introduction to \textit{Peter Wilkins} (London: Oxford University Press, 1990), xxix.
\(^9\) James Sambrook summarizes all that is currently known concerning Paltock in the \textit{Oxford Dictionary of National Biography}, s.v. "Paltock, Robert (1697–1767)," ed. Lawrence Goldman, accessed January 30, 2011, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21228. According to Sambrook, Paltock was a lawyer living on the outskirts of London and married to Anna Skinner, the daughter of a merchant. There is also evidence that suggests Paltock may have been on the losing side of a Chancery case later in his life.
I will further argue that the flying islanders function as analogs for a pre-Reformation British people. This reading has Peter leaving England orphaned and delegitimized as a second Monmouth, who ultimately finds redemption by aggressively reforming and unifying the flying islanders’ religious practice in an attempt to stave off a rebellion from the “Traitor of the West.”

Not all criticism of the text has overlooked the importance of the novel’s religious and historical context. Postcolonial critics have offered several engaging readings of Peter Wilkins that center on its richly problematic encounters between Peter, a patriarchal white European, and the flying islanders. In particular, Peter’s complicated relationship with his wife, a flying woman named Youwarkee, has been read as both mutually affirming and suspiciously determinative of her character.11 These critics have unilaterally, and I would say correctly, identified Peter’s acts of nation-building in the closing chapters of the novel as representations of European paternalism toward the colonies, a reading I will extend to Ireland throughout the progress of this article. Of all the critics to have published on Peter Wilkins, only Marialuisa Bignami has ever given credence to the novel’s overt references to the political and religious issues confronting the Three Kingdoms at mid-century. She reads Peter Wilkins as “a roman à clef on English history of the period immediately following the last Jacobite scare,” hypothesizing that “this may have been the actual reason for Paltock’s writing the novel.”12 Yet rather than follow this train of inquiry in her discussion, Bignami asks how scientific and philosophical “assumptions and presumptions of


the time have been assimilated into [Paltock's] imaginative work.” Nevertheless, she does offer one suggestive political observation, noting that the text manifests the “contemporary craze of code-writing as a means of political intrigue [which] was particularly [prevalent] about and around the recurring Jacobite scares.”

That so many critics have either not recognized or outrightly rejected the contemporaneity of Paltock's novel is surprising, considering that Peter Wilkins establishes its anti-Jacobite credentials in its opening sentence by directly connecting the birth of its narrator to the martyred supporters of the Monmouth Rebellion who were executed during the Bloody Assizes of 1685:

I was born at Penhale, in the country of Cornwall, on the 21st day of December 1685, about four months after my father, Peter Wilkins, who was a zealous Protestant of the Church of England, had been executed by Jefferys, in Somersetshire, for joining in the design of raising the Duke of Monmouth to the British throne.

In radical Protestant circles, these trials were interpreted as evidence of James II's ambition to dissolve traditional English government and establish an absolutist Catholic monarchy similar to that of his French contemporary Louis XIV. Moreover, the executed were popularly beatified in pamphlets and books for decades to come as victims of judicial murder at the hands of the same Lord Chief Justice, Sir George Jeffreys, mentioned in the text. That Peter is literally a product of the failed revolt is enough for us to assume that Paltock placed no small

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13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 56.
16. In his *1688: The First Modern Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), Steve Pincus argues that James II's intention was in fact to deploy Louis XIV's modernizing agenda in England. This argument is less than convincing for several reasons, not the least of which is that it requires us to reduce James II's endorsement of a tolerationist agenda to an act of political pandering as opposed to an authentic and forward-looking move toward inclusivity. Tim Harris's *Revolution: The Great Crisis of British Modernity, 1685–1720* (London: Penguin, 2007) offers a less reductive, though still speculative, scenario, suggesting that James II's tolerationist agenda was likely informed by his personal experience of societal disapproval over his choice to convert to Catholicism.
importance on the trials and intended his text to at least tangentially engage England's troubled religious and political history. This opening prepares the reader to interpret several seemingly innocuous features of his text and its characters as politicized evocations of traditional anti-Jacobite themes and images.

The reference to both Jeffreys and the Bloody Assizes in the opening sentence, for instance, potentially expands the meaning of the novel's title, which describes Peter as "a Cornish Man," beyond its geographical significance as a historical hotbed for rebellion to include a subtle reference to Alderman Henry Cornish, one of London's most historically important Whig sheriffs and the "the highest-placed London Whig to suffer execution in the 1680s." This connection is supported by the fact that Jeffreys would have been known to mid-century English men and women primarily through either works of Protestant martyrology, which routinely included portions of Jeffreys's life selectively chosen to cast him as a sadist focused on "nothing more than how he might revenge [himself] upon the Dissenters," or the widely circulated transcripts of his trials. One of Jeffreys's most infamous judgments during the Bloody Assizes was the conviction of Cornish for treason in 1685 (in the direct aftermath of the Monmouth Rebellion) for his alleged involvement in the Rye House Plot of 1683. Cornish was the sheriff of London, giving him a great deal of power over the London courts. Along with Slingsby Bethel, Cornish expanded the reach of Whig propaganda in the 1680s by stacking juries, making it "virtually impossible to bring successful prosecutions against London-based [Whig] publicists." Moreover, he was both excessively wealthy and one of the first signatories of the Exclusion Bill, making it hardly surprising that his political opponents viewed him as a potential financier of future rebellions.

At his trial, Cornish was accused of having attended a secret meeting at the home of Thomas Shepherd with Monmouth and

several other co-conspirators during the formative stages of the Rye House Plot. Cornish admitted to having attended the meeting, but maintained that he was present for only a few minutes and that he was not privy to any conspiratorial discussion. The evidence against him primarily consisted of the suspect testimony of his underling, Richard Goodenough, the severity of whose own sentence for having been directly involved in the rebellion was lessened because of his willingness to testify against his superior. Gary De Krey argues that Cornish’s opponents were right to question his involvement because “what emerges from this evidence is an impression of Cornish as a very circumspect radical who was probably prudent because he did know what was underway at Shepherd’s house.” Still, Cornish’s trial, like the rest of the Bloody Assizes, was a curiously rushed affair. He was denied both counsel and adequate time to prepare a defense. Not surprisingly, his expedient execution was interpreted by those skeptical of James II’s pledge to preserve English law as a blatant act of political opportunism meant to remove a powerful roadblock to the Monarch’s prerogative: “This Bloody Tragedy in the West being over, our Protestant Judge [Jeffreys] returns for London; soon after which Alderman Cornish felt the anger of somebody behind the Curtain.”

The likelihood that this allusion is more than a mere coincidence is strengthened by the similarly conspicuous naming of Wilkins’s mother, Alice. Lady Alice Lisle, like Cornish, pervades nearly all works of Protestant martyrology focused on the Bloody Assizes, which likewise describe her as a victim of judicial murder under James II. Moreover,

21. A note in the Great Britain Public Record Office’s Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, James II, vol. 1 (London: H.M. Stationery Off., 1960) directly following the entry that records the warrant to arrest Cornish is suggestive of Goodenough’s plea bargain. It reads, “Warrant to the Keeper of Newgate to receive Richard Goodenough, attainted of high treason, into his custody, to keep him safe till he shall be discharged, and to allow him to have pen, ink and paper” (1277).
24. It is worth noting that the list of executed Protestants who were routinely included in these works was not long. Moreover, aside from Algernon Sydney, there are few martyrs whose presence is as strongly felt in these works as that of Alderman Cornish and Lady Lisle.
the execution of Alice Lisle, who was nearly eighty years old at the time of her beheading, was described as not only a political act, but one of mindless brutality. Indeed, even the trial’s official transcript registers sympathy for her age, noting, for instance, that she slept through the reading of her charges and ascribing her somnolence to her advanced years. One martyrlogy describes her execution in representatively poignant terms as “the most moving scene of this horrid and barbarous Tragedy.” Notably, Lisle’s last words, which were also circulated within the martyrlogies, are rife with inflammatory anti-Catholic rhetoric: “I now die of the Reformed Protestant Religion [and] if ever Popery should return into this Nation, it would be a very great and severe Judgment.”

Lisle was eventually found guilty of treason for having given sanctuary to two men who were directly involved in the Monmouth Rebellion: Richard Nelthrop and John Hicks. During her trial, she claims that while she was under the impression that Hicks was a fugitive nonconformist, she was not aware of either man’s involvement in the uprising and had agreed to give them food and shelter only as an act of charity. Notably, the trial’s transcript shows that Lisle’s jury was deeply concerned that the only evidence against her was hearsay and expressed their uneasiness to Chief Justice Jeffreys twice while deliberating. In response, Jeffreys threatened to hold the jury overnight if they did not bring a quick verdict, excoriating their judgment for having not seen that “There is full Proof as Proof can be.” After issuing their verdict, Jeffreys remarked to the jury that “if I had been among you, and she had been my own Mother, I should have found her Guilty.” What is more, Jeffreys’s hatred of dissent is palpable, and while interrogating Lisle he remarked in frustration at the hesitancy of a previous witness that “Presbytery has all manner of Villainy in it, nothing but Presbytery

29. Ibid., 127.
30. Ibid.
could lead that Fellow Dunne to tell so many Lyes as he has here told; for shew me a Presbyterian, and I will engage to shew a lying Knave.”

All of Jeffreys’s trials of Monmouth’s supporters at the Bloody Assizes were filled with such moments of enthusiasm and hyperbole, making it hardly surprising that Jeffreys’s judicial character would become emblematic of James II’s rule for later Whigs, like Thomas Babington Macaulay and Charles Dickens, who were eager to construct the events of 1688–89 as a Protestant rejection of Catholic tyranny—a description better applied to the failed Monmouth Rebellion, which publicly justified itself in confessional terms.

The novel further aligns its narrative with Monmouth and injustice under James II when Peter loses his inheritance to his stepfather, “JG,” whose initials mark him, in all probability, as another allusion to Judge George Jeffreys. Shortly after marrying JG, Alice dies while Peter is away at boarding school. Peter first hears of his mother’s death in a letter he receives from his stepfather, written in response to a request Peter makes to be called home. The letter informs Peter that his mother has been “dead a good while” and that there is little reason to justify the expense of a visit. Sometime later, Peter returns to his family’s estate accompanied by one of his teachers to claim his inheritance. On their arrival, JG informs them that Peter’s father left everything to Alice, that Alice has left everything to him, and that he plans to disinherit Peter, who after a year’s time must “shift for himself.” Later, Peter’s teacher explains to Peter that JG’s claim is legal because Peter’s father, not suspecting that his wife was pregnant when he left to fight in the rebellion, wrote an inadequate will that failed to account for any future offspring. Wolfram Schmidgen, amongst others, argues that in Tom Jones (1749), a novel contemporary with Peter Wilkins, Tom’s status as bastard and eventual master of

31. Ibid., 122.
32. Harris shows that despite the claims of Whig history, the events of 1688–89 cannot be reduced to a Protestant rejection of Catholicism because the revolutionary forces that invited William and Mary to take the throne did so to prevent arbitrary government and absolutism. In fact, the Scottish people were so bold as to declare that the King had broken his contract with them and was therefore unfit to rule. When James II first ascended to the throne he enjoyed considerable public support, despite his religious affiliation, as it was widely believed that he would rule according to the law.
33. Paltock, Peter Wilkins, 27.
Paradise Hall links him with Monmouth and "paradoxically align[s] the legitimacy of the crown with illegitimacy." When we consider that the death of Peter's parents leaves him orphaned and functionally delegitimized, his link to the royal bastard appears equally strong. The progress of Peter's narrative, however, diverges greatly from Tom's, showing that as a cultural icon Monmouth had a range of social valences at midcentury. Whereas the progress of Tom's narrative teaches him prudence, suggesting that "good nature" and experience are more important than hereditary right, Peter's narrative is one of spiritual awakening and national conversion, suggesting that legitimacy arises out of championing the Protestant cause.

Taken as a whole, the novel's opening allusions and direct references to past horrors under James II create a web of anti-Catholic reference that would have been of unique significance to an English Whig in the wake of 1745 Jacobite Rebellion. While, in retrospect, the obvious results of the rebellion were the "crushing of the Jacobite threat and the consolidation of the union and the state," it would take decades for this historical reality to become at all apparent to the inhabitants of the Three Kingdoms. The threat that Charles Edward Stuart represented was still very real, not only because he escaped Cumberland's forces at the Battle of Culloden and found refuge in France, but also because the rebellion offered ample evidence that Britain's bifurcated religious history remained a potential source of civil war. After all, what little support the Young Pretender received from inside England came from the residents of "Lancashire, with its substantial Catholic minority," strengthening the association between Jacobite and Catholic. Ultimately, this association would be deployed as the justification for the Duke of Cumberland's scorched-earth policy in the wake of the Battle of Culloden, during which he oversaw the systematic purge of Catholic institutions from Scotland and the slaughter of thousands.

36. Ibid., 125.
In light of Cumberland's actions in Scotland and the strengthened association between Jacobite and Catholic, it is little wonder that Irish Catholics in the West became an increasingly visible source of anxiety. That Ireland did not become an official member of the United Kingdom until 1801 speaks to the influence anti-Catholic anxiety had over policy at the highest levels of government. Moreover, during the events of 1688–89, a great deal of political debate arose over what measures, if any, should be taken to subdue Catholicism in Ireland. The Williamite branch of Whigs championed a complete toleration of Catholics that would have looked past England's bifurcated religious history toward the economic unification of the nation.37 This was staunchly opposed by not only the conservative Tories, who would agree only to the more limited toleration of dissenters that would eventually be inscribed in the 1689 Act of Toleration, but by the radical Whigs, who saw their opportunity to rid the Three Kingdoms of Catholicism once and for all. As Tim Harris explains,

Whereas the problems in Ireland had never essentially been about religion, but about a series of interacting political, constitutional and economic issues that tended to break down along confessional lines, after 1689 the essence of the problem came to be increasingly seen... as religious in nature—that is, that the Catholics could not be trusted because they were Catholics.38

Peter's narrative is significant because it shows that after the 1745 Jacobite rebellion segments of the confessional strain of Whiggism returned to this interpretation of the events of 1688–89 to justify an agenda of intolerance. In other words, the intertwined history of politics and religion in the Three Kingdoms provided a framework for interpreting secular conflicts in confessional terms, thereby authorizing an overly broad response to an otherwise specific threat.

This relationship between identity politics and overreaching retaliation is most apparent when we consider Peter's status as a Monmouth character in the rest of his narrative, especially the novel's radical

37. Harris, Revolution, 350–52.
38. Ibid., 488.
conclusion. Peter's life at sea begins by following the narrative of Defoe's *Captain Singleton* (1720): after leaving England, Peter's ship is immediately taken by French privateers and he and the crew are left adrift, only to be rescued by Portuguese slavers who imprison them in Africa. After escaping, Peter returns to sea, and his ship is again put off course by a storm, leaving him shipwrecked and alone on a seemingly inescapable deserted island. During his years of seclusion on the island, the novel takes a Crusoe-like turn as Peter's solitude induces him to use his ingenuity to build a well-fortified home, cultivate edible plants, store potable water, and domesticate various birds and mammals. What is more, the self-reflexivity encouraged by his monastic existence inspires spiritual growth that transforms Peter into a devout Protestant with forward-looking Whig ideals—for instance, he believes strongly in the natural rights of all women and men no matter their race or country of origin and he becomes a staunch opponent of slavery and indentured servitude. The narrative sharply diverges from *Robinson Crusoe* when a flying woman, Youwarkee, fortuitously crash-lands on the roof of Peter's house, making him aware of the existence of a nation of indigenous people inhabiting the islands surrounding his own. Youwarkee, like the rest of her people, is endowed with a large, back-mounted wing that allows her to fly with great agility and for long distances through the air. Peter eventually marries Youwarkee and visits her father's kingdom. While there, Peter uses his superior logic and advanced weaponry to put down a rebellion led by the "traitor from the west," after which he proceeds to outlaw the practice of the flying-people's native religion so that he may fulfill a millenarian prophecy and effect the conversion of the entire nation to his own brand of broad-church Protestantism.

This switch from a Defoean narrative of self-discovery to a fantastic narrative of national conversion has long troubled critics. However, this switch is crucial to the novel's political argument. Peter's actions to unify the nation of the flying islanders after achieving his own spiritual redemption brings together the issues facing the burgeoning United Kingdom in the mid-eighteenth century with those of the Monmouth Rebellion and the events of 1688–89. Like the British Isles, the political
center of the flying people's island nation is ruled by a government approaching a constitutional monarch, headed by the pointedly named King Georgetti, and threatened by an imminent rebellion of the western isle of the nation. The direct analogy between the issues facing England, Scotland, and Ireland at midcentury does not, however, extend to the flying islanders themselves. They are a people who have undergone neither reformation nor enlightenment: they have no knowledge of science, military tactics, market-based economics, or human rights, and they practice a religion based upon idol worship and mediated by a highly political and corrupt priest class. In fact, one can argue that they are best understood as an allegorical British people who have been exempted from England's troubled religious history—an English people not yet confronted with the issues of religious pluralism precisely because they have always lived under the oppressive rule of an allegorized version of the Catholic Church. Who better to modernize, unify, and reform this otherwise civil island nation than an equally allegorical Monmouth?

The flying islanders' religion is first discussed in detail in a chapter titled "The religion of the author's family," where Peter assures the reader that both he and his family "live like Christians" and not "like heathens."39 For Peter, living like a Christian is fairly simple. First, he emphasizes the sanctity of marriage, highlighting his indissoluble bond with Youwarkee and the importance of moral education by teaching his children basic moral principles through Bible stories. These principles, however, remain amorphous and undefined. That Peter does not even possess a copy of the Bible until some years after converting the flying islanders emphasizes the latitude of Peter's Protestantism, which is grounded on the public acknowledgment of the preeminence of the Creator and the outright rejection of church authority to meditate prayer through either priests or idols.

Needless to say, Peter is appalled by Youwarkee's beliefs and proceeds to disabuse her of her faith in the efficacy of the idol. This process is not difficult for Peter because his and Youwarkee's religious practices are otherwise remarkably similar. For example, before Peter and Youwarkee

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39. Paltock, Peter Wilkins, 154.
have learned enough of each other's language to fully communicate, they have already begun to pray with one another. Once they are able to communicate freely, Peter asks Youwarkee if she knows what he is doing when he kneels to pray. She replies, "Yes, verily . . . you have been making petitions to the image of the great Collwarr." Peter then asks Youwarkee to tell him about Collwarr so that he might "lead her into a just sense of a Supreme Being." She describes Collwarr as living in heaven and able to see all human action "because his image [a great idol that bears an effigy of him] tells him everything." Despite the fact that the idol is an inanimate object, its status is similar to that of the Pope insofar as the flying islanders' beliefs claim that the idol is the source of all their dogma. Moreover, when Peter finally confronts the bishops of the flying islanders' church, a group the novel refers to as Ragams, the scene culminates in Peter decapitating the idol with his cutlass as if it were a real person, thereby freeing them from its oppressive rule.

Tellingly, and in spite of Peter's views on liberty of conscience, the novel stacks the deck against the possibility that the flying islanders' native beliefs could coexist alongside Peter's broad-church Protestantism by making the flying people's faith in the efficacy of the idol the single difference between them. For this reason, it is somewhat perplexing that several critics have claimed that the novel champions a kind of universal religious toleration. Turner, for instance, argues that both because Peter does not take issue with the name his wife uses to refer to God and because he tolerates several of her heterodox positions, the novel presents religion as "strictly a matter of conscience." While this is true with regard to Peter's conversations with his wife, Turner makes the mistake of taking Peter's toleration of her dissenting opinions as representative of a complete acceptance of all belief, thereby overlooking not only Peter's aggressive reformation of the flying islanders' religion, but, more importantly, the history of toleration within the Anglican Church. The original proponents of Anglican toleration were the Cambridge Platonists, who argued for universal Christian charity for all engaged in the reasoned investigation of religious belief as a protection from both

40. Ibid., 155–56.
41. Ibid., 156.
42. Turner, introduction, Peter Wilkins, xxxi.
enthusiasm and superstition. In his discourse "The Exercise and Progress of a Christian," Benjamin Whichcote explains why such charity is necessary: "And therefore to Speak of natural light, of the use of reason in religion, is to do no disservice at all to grace; for God is acknowledged in both: In the former, as laying the ground-work of his creation: in the latter, as reviving and restoring it." C. A. Patrides shows that the Cambridge Platonists used this reasoning to single out the Catholic Church early on as unworthy of toleration because they believed that "Catholicism has ever attempted to 'Adulterate what is true in Religion, and Superadd what is False.'" From the Commonwealth through the Restoration and early eighteenth century, this belief in Christian community was preserved by the religious thinkers traditionally grouped as Latitudinarians: Benjamin Hoadley, John Tillotson, Isaac Barrow, Edward Fowler, Edward Stillingfleet, and Samuel Clarke, to name a few. The intentions of this disparate group were never as unified as those of the Cambridge Platonists, and the toleration that emerged from their collective thought was a far more vague and amorphous belief in Christian brotherhood that often omitted the importance of free intellectual investigation. The primary tenet of the Latitudinarians was the paradoxical belief that any Christian group seeking to exclude another should itself be excluded from the common community. A Christian, by this definition, is one who accepts his fellow Christians. This doctrine, of course, carries with it the convenience of excluding the politically dangerous groups, like Catholics and dissenting groups whose beliefs differ too much from accepted practice. Indeed, Jean-Louis Quantin argues that, despite its historical reputation, Latitudinarian doctrine was ultimately on the side of conformity during both the Exclusion Crisis of 1678–81 and the greater religious crisis of the Restoration in general. As Paul Monod points out, the Toleration Act of 1689, which applied to only Trinitarian Protestants, "was a step backwards for freedom of religion compared to James II's

Declaration of Indulgence,” which included not only Protestant dissenters, but Jews, Muslims, Catholics, and atheists as well.\textsuperscript{46}

Significantly, Peter’s foundational doctrine that prayer must be made directly to God functions to preclude the flying islanders’ practice of their native religion in exactly the same way that the 1689 Act of Toleration intentionally excluded Catholics from its brotherhood of Christian believers by requiring all citizens to take an oath against the Pope. Once Peter is granted military control of Georgetti’s army, he brings the full weight of his prayer doctrine to bear on the flying islanders’ nation, prohibiting the production of idols and making their worship a capital offense punishable by disfigurement and transportation: “Therefore let Publication be made, for the Destruction of all small Images; and let the Harbourers of them, contrary to this Order, be slit.”\textsuperscript{47}

Indeed, immediately after the narrative mentions the flying people’s idol worship, its plot is taken over by Peter’s quest to fulfill an old religious prophecy held by them: foretelling the coming of “a glum [man], with hair round his head, swimming and flying without the grandee [back-wing]” who will unify the nation by putting to an end their worship of the idol. This prophecy is first told to Peter by a slave he has freed named Nasgig, who explains to him that the coming of the wingless glum was first predicted by a dissenting Ragam four hundred years before Peter’s arrival on the island, during the long reign of the most prosperous king in the nation’s history.\textsuperscript{48} The prophecy maintains that the greatest danger currently facing the flying islanders is the continued practice of their native belief; by extending the analogy to the Three

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\textsuperscript{47} To “be slit” is to have one’s wing cut, making flight impossible. Being slit is generally followed by transportation to a remote island. In a case of high-treason, the cutting of the wing is normally followed by the prisoner’s execution. This only happens once in the novel, when the King’s consort and his closest adviser are found to be in league with the rebels. After being slit, they are both thrown into an active volcano.

\textsuperscript{48} The timeline constructed by Nasgig makes sense within England’s political and religious history. About four hundred years before 1750, when the novel was first published, Edward III was in the midst of his successful and long reign and Wycliffe, a possible source for the prophetic Ragam, was about to come into conflict with the Catholic church.
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Kingdoms, Paltock implies that the continued practice of Catholicism in the British Isles threatens the stability of the entire nation:

the West shall be divided from the East, and bring Sorrow, Confusion, and Slaughter, till [one] with unknown Fire and Smoak shall destroy the Traitor of the West, settle the ancient Limits of the Monarchy, by common Consent establish what I would have taught you [to stop worshiping the idol], change the Name of this Country, introduce new Laws and Arts, add Kingdoms to this State, and force Tributes from the Bowels of the Earth, of such things as this Kingdom shall not know till then, and shall never afterwards want; and then shall return to the Waters again. Take care . . . you miss not the Opportunity when it may be had; for once lost, it shall never, never more return; and then, wo, wo, wo, to my poor Country!49

Significantly, every one of the predictions foretold by the prophecy (the changing of the country's name and its growth, for instance) function as obvious political allusions to the development of the United Kingdom. Moreover, the prophecy locates the division of the flying people's nation in its unwillingness to undergo a complete and uniform reformation, predicting that once this reformation takes place on all of the islands that make up the kingdom, it will become an enlightened and prosperous nation. At this time in British history, Ireland was the only country currently included in the modern-day United Kingdom that was not yet unified with its neighbors. For this reason, it is even more significant that the rebel leader that Peter eventually defeats in battle, Harlokin, is described repeatedly as "the traitor of the west."50 While it cannot be doubted that Bonnie Prince Charlie had a great deal of support from the Irish, when he did descend on England, it was from the north with a force of Scottish clansmen. By marking the traitor as coming from a western island, Paltock singles out Ireland and its substantial Catholic population as clear and present dangers to the stability of the nation and the liberty of its inhabitants.

49. Paltock, Peter Wilkins, 243.
50. Ibid., 246.
That the novel's anti-Jacobite anxiety fixates on Ireland contrasts with the historical reality of Catholic Ireland's passivity during both Jacobite rebellions, further evidencing the extent to which the rebellion had united Catholic and Jacobite within the public imagination. Indeed, the great famine of 1741 and the propensity for young Irish men—the so-called "wild geese"—to leave their homeland to fight in the armies of other Catholic nations on the continent marked the 1740s as a decade of uneasy submissiveness to the dominant Protestant and Whig government in Dublin. The penal laws depressed national morale even further, reducing Irish Catholics to a landless and voiceless tenant class. Still, Catholics in Ireland dramatically outnumbered Protestants, and the belief that all Catholics supported the Pretender was widely held by Whigs in both Ireland and England during the rebellion. Even the Gentleman's Magazine (1731–1922), a broadly circulated and typically moderate publication, printed a number of highly charged tracts, poems, and editorials that either assumed or argued for the connection between "papery" and the rebellion. In one noteworthy instance, the magazine reprinted a tract arguing that "Tho' they often declare the contrary; it is impossible, that a man can be truly a Roman Catholic, without wishing well to the pretender." What makes this tract so important is how it is forwarded to the reader as representative of the popular sentiment of the nation, having already been "so well approved that it has been read in country churches, re-printed in different parts of the kingdom, and many thousands given away by noblemen, gentlemen, and others."

With this context in mind, it is significant that Peter justifies his military endeavors to put down the rebellion of the western isles as a part of his larger efforts to suppress the practice of the islanders' native beliefs and convert the nation. Indeed, his cultural war against the idols and institutions of the flying islanders mirrors the Duke of Cumberland's purge of Catholic institutions from Scotland after the Battle of Culloden in the attempt to standardize religious practice through military conquest. This connection is in all likelihood not incidental, as even the

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52. Gentleman's Magazine, October 1745, 522.
53. Ibid.
description of the final battle fought in Peter Wilkins appears to be con-
sciously modeled after descriptions of Culloden circulated in magazines
and newspapers. In this passage from one of the earliest histories of the
second Jacobite rebellion, for instance, we see Culloden described in
representative terms as a rout of the rebel forces by a more disciplined
and better equipped English army:

The Frassers and MacDonalds, which compassed [the rebel army’s] Right Wing, made an Attack on his Royal Highness’s Left, and endeavored to get in Sword in Hand but were so well received, and the Fire so close and regular, that on the second Discharge, they fell into the utmost Confusion, and fled over an adjacent Hill. The whole Body of the Rebels followed their Example, and immediately took to their Heels. . . . The [Duke of Cumberland’s] army moved regularly forward . . . and did great Execution.54

In a remarkably similar passage describing the final battle in the novel, Peter’s army is described as achieving an equally one-sided victory when the rebel forces he faces attempt an equally ill-fated retreat after being mauled by his canons:

I had not loaded my Cannon with Ball, but small sized Stones, about sixty in each; and seeing the Length of their Line, I spread my Cannons Mouths somewhat wider than their Breaches, and then taking my Observation by a bright Star, for there was a clear Dawn all round the Horizon, I observed, as I retired to my Chair, how that Star answered to the Elevation of my Cannon; and when the foremost Ranks, who, not seeing my Men stir, were approaching almost over me to fall on them, and had come to my Pitch; I fired two Pieces of my Ordnance at once, and so mauled them, that there dropped about ninety upon the first Discharge, together with their Commander; the rest being in flight, and so close together, not being able to turn fast enough to fly, being stopped by those behind them, not only hindered those behind from turning about,

but clogged up their own Passage: Seeing them in such a prodigious Cluster, I so successfully fired two more Pieces, that I brought down double the Number of the first Shot; and then giving the Word to fall on, my Cutlass-Guard, and Pikemen, did prodigious Execution.55

I would further draw attention to Peter’s detached narrative voice in the passage quoted from the novel. Despite the scene of mass carnage that results from his emotionless and ruthless use of technology to rout the heterodox army, Peter—like his literary ancestor, Robinson Crusoe—sees no moral problem in using whatever means he deems necessary to achieve his goal, even if that entails slaughtering an army in retreat. Perhaps the most striking thing in all of this is the novel’s following portrayal of the meek surrender of the towns and cities of the west after the battle. The westerners rightly fear Peter because of the brutal reputation he earns from his massacre of the rebel army. Peter’s rousing success suggests that the bloody and forced reformation of the western isle is justified by the peace it brings to the empire.

If Paltock did intend his novel to function as political allegory, its final images of unity and nation building after the conversion and conquest of the western isle function as utopian justifications for his confessional war. By drawing on his audience’s shared cultural memory of judicial abuse under James II and their shared fear of the Jacobite threat after “The Forty-Five,” Paltock prepares them to accept his final solution to Britain’s historical struggle with religious pluralism. Not only does the opening of Paltock’s novel suggest this reading, its final image leaves the audience with a push toward real-world political action. The last scene of the novel is that of Peter, on his deathbed, narrating his story to an English passenger on a ship that picks him out of the ocean after he is shot out of the sky on his return trip to England.56 With his death, Peter, like Monmouth before him, is prevented from bringing his millennial vision of radical Protestant reform and national unity to bear on Britain, leaving the future of the empire in the gentle hands of the novel’s polite and commercial Whig readership.

55. Paltock, Peter Wilkins, 295–96.
56. Earlier in the narrative, Peter constructs a chair suspended from four ropes that the flying islanders use to transport him around their nation.