



William Hogarth, *An Election Entertainment* (1755). Print 40 x 54 cm, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, based on an oil-painting at Sir John Soane's Museum, London. Public domain.

## UNFREEZING TIME

Patricia Fara\*

### 'Give us our Eleven Days'

In this bawdy parody of the Last Supper, William Hogarth is mocking an exceptionally prolonged and corrupt political contest at Oxford in 1754. Towards the bottom right of his chaotic scene, a Tory banner proclaiming 'Give us our Eleven Days' is being trampled on by a hired Whig thug as raw gin pours down onto his wounded head. Hogarth's picture helped to consolidate the urban myth that when a Whig government proposed altering the calendar, ignorant mobs rioted in protest because they believed their lives would be shortened.

The Oxford campaign was so extraordinary that it hit the national press. One mocking Tory ballad lampooned a Whig candidate by name:

The next recommended was *P-rk-r* the  
SMALL,  
Whose Character – Faith – is just nothing  
at all;  
Nay, 'twas whispered in *Oxford* by some  
simple Loon,  
That *He* was put up by the *Man* in the  
Moon.

A few years earlier, Lord Parker – *P-rk-r* the  
SMALL – had chaired a House of Commons  
committee approving the Royal Society's  
recommendation that Britain's calendar should  
be altered in two main ways: by chopping  
eleven days out of September 1752, and by  
beginning every year on 1 January instead  
of 25 March. One prime supporter of this  
dramatic shift had been Parker's father, the  
Earl of Macclesfield, who became President of  
the Royal Society in 1752, the same year that  
the changes were implemented. This had been  
a sensible decision, but it remained unpopular

because of its political, religious and economic ramifications.

The Oxford Battle culminated a Calendar War that had been running for almost two centuries. Throughout, the central issue was not determining what was right, but establishing who had the authority to decide what was right. The calendrical system introduced by Julius Caesar was getting increasingly out of step with the solar system. The spring equinox was occurring at progressively earlier dates, which made it hard to set the correct date for Easter. To resolve this situation, in 1582 Pope Gregory changed the rules for inserting leap days, and Catholic countries soon followed his lead. In contrast, Protestants rejected any imposition of control by the Vatican.

By the end of the seventeenth century, Europe was a chaotic calendrical patchwork, and pressure was put on England to join other northern European nations by shifting. Committed to national superiority, the Royal Society retained its isolationist stance: Isaac Newton was so fervently anti-Catholic that he effectively shelved the question, despite the clear benefits of being in line with the rest of Europe. Perhaps he was swayed by his conviction that he had been especially chosen by God to be born on Christmas Day 1642 – although not in France and other European countries, where his birthdate was 4 January 1643. As an added complication, on Newton's side of the Channel, he was baptised on 1 January 1642: the English year began not on 1 January but almost three months later on Lady Day, the commemoration of the annunciation (when Mary was informed that she would become the mother of Jesus).

Britain finally conformed in 1752, although ironically, the Royal Society imposed a Newtonian concept of time – what now seems the common-sense view that time marches uniformly and inexorably onwards, independent of human activities. But older ways of envisaging time reflected people's yearly customs and daily rituals, their relationship to the past and to their spiritual beliefs, their lived experiences of time as an elusive quality rather than an abstract quantity. Several traditional calendars were already woven into the annual cycle. Some were decreed nationally, such as Christmas, Lent and Easter, or the four terms of the law courts (Michaelmas, Hilary, Easter

and Trinity). Others originated in agricultural communities that lived by the seasons, not by the clock – weeks set aside for bringing in the harvest or holding a local fair, and days of high or low tides, of full moon or no moon.

Confusion reigned for several years. Even genuine guidance sounded like a parody: 'The FAIR formerly held on the 29th Day of *September*, will be holden on the 10th day of *October*. The fair formerly held on *St. Thomas's Day* will be holden on the first Day of *January*... The Fair formerly held on the second *Friday* in *May*, will be holden on the second *Friday* after *Old May Day*, unless when the 12th of *May* falls on a *Friday*, then to be holden on the *Friday* next following...' Administrative complexities resulted in some inconvenient compromises, such as setting 6th April as the start of the new tax year, and although government legislation aimed to clamp down on opportunistic profiteering, people worried – with justification – that employers and merchants would find ways of short-changing them.

The first in a series of four canvases at Sir John Soane's Museum in London, Hogarth's *Election Entertainment* savages sleazy campaigning techniques, such as bribing voters with lavish feasts or threatening them with lost trade. In this crowded Guzzletown inn, Whig supporters are gorging drunkenly, Tory heavies are throwing bricks, political agents are perpetrating shady financial transactions, and the mayor is being bled by an apothecary after eating too many oysters. Although the Tories had let the Whig calendar reforms go through, now it suited them to object, but Hogarth knew full well that no genuine 'Give us our Eleven Days' banner had ever been waved. And somehow, the Whigs contrived to win the seat despite having received fewer votes.

### Main Sources and Further Reading

- Robert Poole, *Time's Alteration: Calendar Reform in Early Modern England* (London: UCL Press, 1998).
- Jenny Uglow, *Hogarth: A Life and a World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997).

\*Dr Patricia Fara is an historian of science and has been President of the AHS since 2016. This is number twelve in a series of short articles in which she discusses a number of images, each illustrating a different way of incorporating time and its passing within a picture without showing a clock.