

## Colley Cibber and Winchester College

In *An Apology for the Life of Mr Colley Cibber* (1740), the actor and playwright recalls his failure to gain a place at Winchester College:

About the Year 1687, I was taken from School to stand at the Election of Children into *Winchester College*; my being, by my Mother's side, a Descendent of *William of Wickham*, the Founder, my Father (who knew little how the World was to be dealt with) imagined my having that Advantage, would be Security enough for my Success, and so sent me simply down thither, without the least favourable Recommendation or Interest, but that of my naked Merit, and a pompous Pedigree in my Pocket. (p.48)

No existing edition or biography explores sufficiently the circumstances behind Cibber's misfortune. Richard Hindry Barker's biography simply quotes the story in its entirety as though it were self-explanatory.<sup>1</sup> In his edition of 1968, R.B.S. Fone followed the precedent of Edmund Bellchambers in 1822 by declining to annotate it; in 1889 R.W. Lowe merely remarked that Cibber's descent from William of Wykeham must have been indirect, William having died without issue.<sup>2</sup> The latter point is filled out handsomely in Harald Faber's study of Cibber's father, the sculptor Caius Gabriel Cibber, which tracks thirteen generations back from his wife and the actor's mother, Jane Colley, to William of Wykeham's sister, Agnes.<sup>3</sup> In her 1986 biography of Cibber, Helen Koon comes closest to an explanation, but questions remain as to what it was about the system of admissions at Winchester that led Caius Gabriel to believe his son would win a place, and what went wrong.<sup>4</sup>

The 'Election' at this time was not a formal examination but an annual gathering by a group of staff (the Electors) who would determine which boys

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Hindry Barker, *Mr Cibber of Drury Lane* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), p.7.

<sup>2</sup> R.B.S. Fone, ed., *An Apology for the Life of Mr Colley Cibber* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968); Edmund Bellchambers, ed., *An Apology for the Life of Mr Colley Cibber* (London, 1822); R.W. Lowe, ed., *An Apology for the Life of Mr Colley Cibber* (London, 1889).

<sup>3</sup> Harald Faber, *Caius Gabriel Cibber* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), p.17.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Koon, *Colley Cibber. A Biography* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1986).

should be admitted and which should be given scholarships. In Helen Koon's description, one of the masters would ask 'the obligatory question, "Cantas?"', to which the required response was 'a rendition, melodic or otherwise, of the hundredth psalm'.<sup>5</sup> Koon asserts that Cibber 'must have' been coached in the routine by his maternal uncle, Edward Colley, who had been admitted to Winchester as a Scholar in 1654. The 'Election' appears to have had other features too, if no more than a check on each candidate's basic level of education. For all the allegations of semi-literacy levelled at Cibber following his award of the Poet Laureateship in 1730 (the prize goes to *Fog's Weekly Journal*, which on 12 December 1730 cited a report to the effect that 'the renowned Keyber is learning to spell'), such a check should not have presented too much of a hurdle. There is no reason to doubt the *Apology's* claim that Cibber had been a promising student, capable of work 'better than any Boy's in the Form' (p.7), during his time at the Free School in Grantham, which was also Isaac Newton's alma mater.

Following Cibber's own account, Helen Koon cites the lack of recommendations as a factor in the boy's failure; she also notes that fifteen was 'a bit old to be entering a school that generally admitted boys only between the ages of eight and twelve' going on to state that exceptions were made for 'excellence in scholarship or for founder's kin'.<sup>6</sup> The latter system meant that each year two places were reserved for descendants of William of Wykeham, who founded the College in 1382. In this version of events, therefore, Cibber failed to secure his place because he had no references to compensate for what was probably an insufficient display of 'naked Merit', but there is no explanation of why his family connection failed to sway the Electors.

The answer may lie in the drawn-out process of Election. Evidence in the College Archives suggests that the Electors often made their decisions in advance of the annual gathering, on the basis of testimonials, while the two places available each year to 'Founder's Kin' might be decided years in advance; names might be 'put down' at birth. Just turning up with the family pedigree was highly risky: as Cibber puts it in the *Apology*, his father may as well have suggested to the Mayor of Winchester that he be returned to Parliament (p.7).

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<sup>5</sup> Koon, p.13.

<sup>6</sup> Koon, p.13.

Cibber chose to focus on the colourful absurdity of his 'pompous Pedigree' but signally failed to mention the more immediate precedent cited by Helen Koon: his Uncle Edward, who in addition to his scholarship was admitted as 'Founder's Kin'. His omission seems odd. We might conclude that Cibber did not want to admit to having failed in spite of bespoke coaching, but then the *Apology* is hardly short of moments (the reference to 'pompous Pedigree' being one of them) where he advertises his deficiencies in the spirit of mock-disparagement that many of his contemporaries took for nauseating egoism. But why not mention Uncle Edward, who it turns out appears nowhere at all in the *Apology*?

The answer may lie in a family humiliation. Between 1673 and 1678 (i.e. when Cibber was aged two to seven), Caius Gabriel had spent periods of time in the Marshalsea Prison for debts amounting to well over £1000. One of his most significant creditors was none other than his own brother-in-law, Edward Colley. In the Easter Term of 1675, while still in the Marshalsea for an earlier non-repayment, Caius Gabriel had been summoned for the £500 he had borrowed from Edward on April 23<sup>rd</sup>. If the speed of that action indicates anger or desperation on Edward's part, his further claim for £200 in costs speaks of something like vindictiveness. Fortunately for Caius Gabriel, Edward was awarded a mere 28s 8d.<sup>7</sup> We cannot be sure how Cibber family relations stood in 1687, when fifteen-year-old Colley travelled to Winchester, but it may be that their financial dispute with Edward left Caius Gabriel and Jane reconstructing for themselves the terms on which their son might be admitted to the College. There may have been no coaching at all; still less, an understanding of how places for scholars and founder's kin were in practice allocated.

If there was a family rift, evidence suggests that it eventually healed. Childless, Edward bequeathed his Northamptonshire estate to his wife Anne, but specified that his sister Jane should inherit in the event of Anne's death. Complications arose when Anne remarried a man called Thomas Woodhall, and Caius Gabriel fought a bitter legal battle to have his rights respected following Anne's death.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Faber, pp.20-21.

<sup>8</sup> See Faber, p.17.

To the extent that Caius Gabriel was at fault for the Winchester episode – if less so than his son was prepared to admit – he learned his lesson. Cibber goes on to explain that his father took ‘a more judicious care’ of Lewis, the actor’s younger brother, who in 1697 (the year of Jane’s death, incidentally) became, like his Uncle Edward, a Scholar and Founder’s Kin. In the same year Caius Gabriel donated to the College the statue of William of Wykeham that still graces the entrance to the College schoolroom (known as ‘School’):<sup>9</sup> ‘so well executed’, wrote Cibber with a tinge of bitterness, ‘that it seems to speak – for its Kinsmen’ (p.48). Beneath it, the inscription describes Caius Gabriel as ‘statuaris regius’, reflecting the post of Sculptor in Ordinary to William III he had held since May 1693.<sup>10</sup> Given the strongly pro-Williamite sentiments expressed elsewhere in the *Apology*, it is surprising that Cibber declined to mention his father’s title, as though his professional glory was as unsettling as the shame of his imprisonment in what one contemporary described as ‘the worst Prison in the Nation’: not the relatively benign home of Dickens’s Dorrit family, but doubling up as a county gaol for Surrey and beset by filth, riots and starvation.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> ‘School’ was built by subscription between 1683 and 1687. Those giving the largest sums of money had their coats of arms included in the internal decorations. Caius Gabriel derived his coat of arms partly from the Cibo family of Italy, but it does not appear in School. See Faber, p.18.

<sup>10</sup> Faber, p.12.

<sup>11</sup> See Jerry White, *Mansions of Misery. A Biography of the Marshalsea Debtors’ Prison* (London: Vintage, 2016). The description of the Marshalsea is contained in a petition of 1722, cited in White, p.52.