

## JOHN OLDMIXON IN BRIDGWATER 1716-30

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In the eighteenth century the West Country was much more remote from the metropolis than is the case today. That Bridgwater was, none the less, no haven of cloistered and contemplative virtue, a recent article in the *Proceedings* has abundantly shown.<sup>1</sup> Mr. I. M. Slocombe's theme was an affray which took place in the town during July 1717. Sadly, this was by no means an exceptional visitation on the local populace. At a time when the echoes of the 1715 Rebellion were still heard — in clangorous rather than muffled tones — the borough witnessed many outbreaks of violence, and underwent several moments of alarm. The prevailing mood seems to have been coloured by that taut, neurotic strain which Professor Plumb has seen as characteristic of the age at large.<sup>2</sup> Fears of Jacobites, suspicion of foreign agents, heavy foreboding of another episode like the Monmouth rising — still fresh in men's minds: these emotions jostled one another in the collective consciousness. This we know, rather than surmise. At least one bystander set down his anxieties in the midst of this trouble. And if he was not a disinterested spectator — quite the reverse — he did have the luck to be fluent, observant and energetic. That the major work of his life should have lain in the practice of history is a mere accident; but it does add further interest to his account.

John Oldmixon was born in 1672 or 1673, most probably in Bridgwater, although no record of his baptism survives. His father died whilst he was still a small child, and he was sent to live with Mrs. John Norman, daughter of Admiral Blake's brother Humphrey. Norman was the son of a Puritan Vicar of Bridgwater, and a schoolmaster. By the time he was fifteen Oldmixon had gone to London to live with another relative — his maternal uncle Sir John Bawden. His mother died soon afterwards, and there are signs that he entered trade at this time (Bawden had been a successful City merchant, with a strong parliamentary interest in Bridgwater). However, Oldmixon was already embarking on a literary career, possibly to the detriment of his commercial prospects. The recoinage in 1695 hit him as it did others, and he incurred losses at the hands of 'certain vile Extortioners in the City.' One result was that he was forced to mortgage his family estate of Oldmixon in 1696 (see text of his letters below, and footnote 19). By this time he was well launched on his writing career, even if his poems and dramas had enjoyed little success. After the accession of Queen Anne, Oldmixon shifted his aim from these polite exercises in *belles lettres*, and turned himself into a miscellaneous hack with a strong line in historical compilation. From about 1710 on, he became prominent as a vigorous Whig journalist and pamphleteer. For a while he caught the mood of at least one section of the public; and his vehement prose could match anything Swift, Defoe or Steele produced at this juncture. Yet he was already a somewhat embittered man; and the vitriolic historical controversies amidst which he spent most of his later years (he died in 1742) and for which he is best known today are foreshadowed in these caustic pamphlets of 1710 to 1716.

Oldmixon was appointed Collector of Customs for the port of Bridgwater on 11 June

<sup>1</sup> I. M. Slocombe, 'A Bridgwater Riot, 1717', *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.* **106** (1962), 66-76.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance J. H. Plumb, *The First Four Georges* (London, 1966), 13-36; *England in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, 1950), 11-20.

1716, in place of Nicholas Jeffreys.<sup>3</sup> His post was the reward for his service to the Whig/Hanoverian cause: in particular, his pamphlets and papers combatting the strong Tory press-corps, led by Swift, in the last years of Anne's reign. Oldmixon was a man easily disgruntled, and he did not think it a very good reward. About two years after his arrival, he wrote to the London publisher Jacob Tonson, sen., asking for the latter's support in his highly optimistic bid to become Poet Laureate.<sup>4</sup> But earlier than that, on 1 June 1717, whilst on a brief visit to London, he had complained to the new Secretary of State, Joseph Addison, of his 'Absence at a poor Post 120 Miles off'.<sup>5</sup> A hundred and twenty miles, that is, from the centre of patronage and power. Oldmixon was a local man and his family on both sides hailed from the district;<sup>6</sup> but he regarded his appointment as exile, neither more nor less. When Pope, years later, referred to 'a small place' which Oldmixon 'enjoyed' (cutting word!), the Duncce brought himself to agree for once with his oppressor.<sup>7</sup> Symbolically, Oldmixon's literary undertakings at this time included a projected translation of Ovid's *Tristia* and *Ex Ponto*, the works of the Roman author's exile.

The trouble lay chiefly in the strongly Tory sentiments which were prevalent in Bridgwater. It has been observed that highflying opinions were most common in economically rather backward areas, untouched by the growth in trade at the end of the seventeenth century: the West Country was one such region.<sup>8</sup> As early as 1709 Oldmixon had written of the Tory 'Cant' around the time of the Exclusion Crisis, which 'prevail'd no where more than in this County' [Somerset]. And he goes on to quote a declaration made by Bridgwater Corporation in 1680. 'This Burrough', he adds, 'was then under the Influence of the same Mr. [Ralph] S[towel]'; and, by his means, some rude illiterate Mechanicks, Inn-holders, and the like, were preferr'd to the Magistracy, Persons of contemptible Parts, of desperate and loose Principles . . .' There is more in this vein, and it will be a familiar charge of Oldmixon.<sup>9</sup> (For the town itself he owned great affection)<sup>10</sup>. He had been living in Bridgwater in 1680, but had reached only his seventh year, so that there is no firsthand testimony in the proper sense, as there is with the events of the Monmouth rebellion.<sup>11</sup>

The letter of June 1717 to Addison ends with a typical piece of self-pity: 'I will not trouble you with the Impertinence of my private Concerns, but did you know Sir, how I have been usd by the [High Church] Faction in the Country & how persecuted too by their Procurement, I flatter My Self Your Humanity wou'd grant me your Protection in this Case, which wou'd be a great Relief to Me.' But Addison was out of office soon,

<sup>3</sup> P.R.O., T 11/16/351. The warrant is listed in *Calendar of Treasury Books*, 30 (2), ed. Shaw (London, 1957), p. 247. Jeffreys was Mayor of Bridgwater in 1718 and 1726, and doubtless a Tory if not actually a Jacobite.

<sup>4</sup> Oldmixon's correspondence with the Tonsons is found in the British Museum, Add. MS. 28275 and Edinburgh University Library, MS. La. II. 423. It is transcribed, along with other letters, in App. V of my unpublished Cambridge University doctoral dissertation on Oldmixon, 'The Whig Controversialist as Duncce' I, 471-530.

<sup>5</sup> P.R.O., SP 79/8 (unfoliated).

<sup>6</sup> Details are given in my article on 'John Oldmixon's Family', *Notes and Queries* [forthcoming].

<sup>7</sup> Note to *The Dunciad*, A.II.199: Oldmixon, *Memoirs of the Press* (1742), 33.

<sup>8</sup> Plumb, *The Growth of Political Stability in England 1675-1725* (London, 1967), 8.

<sup>9</sup> [Oldmixon], *The History of Addresses* (1709-11), 17-18; see 40-41, 79-80.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance [Oldmixon] *History of England* (1730 [i.e. 1729]), 285. For the dating of this volume, cf. my article, 'The Printing of Oldmixon's Histories', *The Library* 5th ser. 24 (1969), 150-154.

<sup>11</sup> [Oldmixon], *History* (1729), 701-704.

dead before very long: and Oldmixon had to soldier on. Luckily for posterity he was assiduous in writing to London to complain of his hardships; so we have a fair amount of evidence surviving. Oldmixon's business letters to the firm of Tonson occasionally include some reference to the state of affairs in Somerset. However, it is chiefly his official correspondence which concerns us. Initially Oldmixon's letters to the Customs Commissioners in Thames Street are in question. Many of these must be lost or buried within the voluminous Customs archives,<sup>12</sup> but a number were sent on by Charles Carkesse, Secretary to the Commissioners, to the department of the Under-Secretary of State. It was this latter official who dealt with matters of security and public order. Subsequently, Oldmixon seems to have written direct to the Under-Secretary, Charles Delafaye. Nor was this purely a case of ingratiating himself with the administration. It appears that customs officers were expected, as part of their job, to keep an eye open for trouble of all sorts. Moreover, it is not without significance that Oldmixon was appointed in the first place. Delafaye had himself acted as Gazetteer a number of years earlier.<sup>13</sup> A later occupant of this post, and publisher of *The Spectator*, Samuel Buckley, had left journalism in order to act as a kind of coordinator of government information services. The gap between party polemicist and political agent was much narrower then than it is today, a fact which Defoe's work on behalf of Harley strikingly illustrates. The frequency with which writers figure in the lists of Secret Service payments, in the Walpole era especially, may have something to do with the same set of circumstances. Thus it comes about that Oldmixon sent what almost amount to newsletters — it was part of his brief.<sup>14</sup>

However, the first time that Oldmixon's troubles come to the surface, the source of our knowledge is not the historian himself. In March 1718 a warrant was issued to the constables of Bridgwater, warning Oldmixon, John Allen and John Gilbert to appear before the Mayor in order to give an account of persons who went up and down the streets of the town in a riotous and seditious manner. No doubt this was an aftermath of the 'High Church and Ormonde' troubles, to judge from the slogans quoted; but one does not have to take all Oldmixon's claims seriously to believe that the Council was deliberately choosing Whig scapegoats. Again, three months later, information was lodged that Oldmixon was among those who had frequented Presbyterian and Anabaptist conventicles. Oldmixon, as a matter of fact, always claimed to be a loyal adherent of the Established Church, though his uncle Sir John Bawden was a Dissenter. His prejudices against the High Church were, nevertheless, as ferocious as those of any Presbyterian.<sup>15</sup> Both Allen and Gilbert were associated with Oldmixon in the Duke of Chandos's building schemes around Castle Street a few years later. Allen was a prominent physician and inventor. His major work, *Synopsis Universae Medicinae Practicae*, was

<sup>12</sup> Many of the Customs records were lost in a fire early in the nineteenth century. The correspondence between the Treasury and the Customs can be followed to some extent in P.R.O. T 11, but I have not traced many of the desired references either there or in the Library of H.M. Customs and Excise, Mark Lane, E.C. 3. I have to thank the Librarian, Mr. E. Carson, for answering an enquiry.

<sup>13</sup> See for instance H. L. Snyder, 'The Circulation of Newspapers in the Reign of Queen Anne', *The Library* 5th ser. 23 (1968), 216; and Laurence Hanson, *Government and the Press 1695-1763* (Oxford, 1967), 86. The gazetteer was a government officer appointed to publish news by authority.

<sup>14</sup> It is noticeable that Carkesse forwarded to Delafaye letters from the Collectors at Minehead and elsewhere on such topics as the movement of the Spanish fleet (SP 35/16/10, 15, 28, etc.).

<sup>15</sup> *H.M.C. 3rd Report* (London, 1872), App., 318-319. On Bawden, cf. my article 'Sir John Bawden', *N.Q.S.D.* [forthcoming].

issued by Tonson in 1720. There are many references to him in Oldmixon's letters and published works; he seems to have helped in his friend's antiquarian researches.<sup>16</sup>

It will be clear that Oldmixon's persecution mania was beginning to have plenty of objective material to nourish it. When he wrote to the elder Tonson in December of the same year, expressing his hope to succeed Rowe as Laureate, he exclaimed bitterly, 'The Life I lead here is not worth living'. In his habitual vein he attempted to enlist Tonson's support by pointing out the horrors of his embattled state: 'Hard will be my Case if while I am banished in a Corner of ye Kingdom surrounded with Jacobites vilifyd insulted & having not a Minute Ease my Friends will not endeavour that this fatal Absence of mine may not be my Ruin.' That Oldmixon should refer to his own birthplace in this way is interesting.<sup>17</sup>

Three months later he sent a series of letters to the Commissioners on the subject of a Jacobite scare, involving an alleged threat of invasion. The failure of the planned 'Nineteen' Rebellion is a matter of history nowadays, but Oldmixon was not alone in fearing a substantial rising; nor was his idea that Swedish elements might have had a share in this altogether unrealistic.<sup>18</sup> At least one earlier letter is untraceable: but Carkesse sent on others to Delafaye's office, so that they are preserved among the State Papers Domestic. Two letters are reproduced here in their entirety, as they require very little by way of gloss to bring out the full situation. A third report from Oldmixon was transcribed in London, and survives, possibly in a truncated form.

#### John Oldmixon to the Customs Commissioners

Hond Sirs | The 2 Tidesmen I mentioned in my Dispatch to Yr Honours last Post brought me a Swede who was examind by a Justice of the Peace, the Under Sheriff & my Self

His Examination was very inconsistent, The Acct he gave of himself controdictory containing 20 or 30 Years more than he was of Age. He pretended to come from Uphill on this Coast to fish in a Schallop he bought at Bristol, but he brought no Netts with him & being of that Country myself I know tis not the Time of fishing, nor the Manner in Boats on that Coast.<sup>19</sup> He said he was to carry his Fish basket in his Boat to Bristol 8 Leagues off as he caught it which is impracticable most Times till the Fish is not fitt for Market. He said also he was never other than a Foremast Man, Yet at the same Time declared he came from London to Bristol to recover a cloth Suit which cost him 10*l*. He could remember with great Exactness & at the first Demand every Voyage he had made in the Course of 60 or 70 Years, tho he is not

<sup>16</sup> On Allen (?1660-1741), see *D.N.B.* He also held a minor customs post in Bridgwater — Minute Book 5 (1716-7), p. 97, H.M. Customs and Excise Library.

<sup>17</sup> B.M. Add. MS. 28275, ff. 46, 84.

<sup>18</sup> For an account of the failure of the 'Nineteen' and other Jacobite intrigues involving Alberoni, Ormonde and (whilst he lived) Charles XII, see *The Jacobite Attempt of 1719*, ed. W. K. Dickson (Edinburgh, 1895); Basil Williams, *Stanhope* (Oxford, 1932), chs. 8-13; and Sir Charles Petrie, *The Jacobite Movement* (London, 1932), ch. 5.

<sup>19</sup> P.R.O., SP 35/15/119. Oldmixon's patrimonial estate was indeed located within two miles or so of Uphill (*cf.* letter of 8 April 1719 in text below). On the other hand it appears that he had disposed of all his rights to the land except a technical ownership, when the estate was mortgaged in 1696 for 500 years, in consideration of a lump sum and a peppercorn rent. Oldmixon did have an option to repossess himself but failed to take it up. Information from Somerset Record Office, Taunton, DD/SAS, C/77, Bundle 9.

above 45 Years Old or thereabouts, but could not remember within 1, 2, or 3 Years how old he was, when he was marryd which woud very much have confounded his Chronology. He had a silver Coin of Genoa in his Pocket which may weigh 15 or 16 [oz. ?], Few Foremastmen or Fishermen can long keep such a Piece there & yet he had it above a Year. He had saild out of Bristol twice or thrice and livd there now 2 Months, Yet he knew no Body to give an Account of him but one whose Christen Name was Richard. He was very easy & full of Assurance. The Justice & Under Sheriff taking him for a Trifler and a Vagrant rather than a Spye did not think fit to secure him. The Man has doubtless been a hard Labourer but tis as doubtless that he is not so great a Fool as a Person, especially a Swede, must be to come from Bristol to Uphill & set up to get his Bread there by fishing without Nett or Tackle. I sent a Tidesman back with him & wrote to George Knyfton the Surveyor at Uphill to give the Collector of Bristol, in whose Precints that Creek is, Intimation of the Fellow's being there as also to have a watchfull Eye over him till he is gone or sent out of the Country.<sup>20</sup> The Rabble of this Place was very much incensd against me and my Brother Officers for disturbing this Foreigner whom they took to be a Friend to the Cause<sup>21</sup> & a Company of them as we drove past peaceably by cryd out What do those damnd Rogues pretend to?<sup>22</sup>

I am with the Utmost Respect | Hond Sirs | Your Honours most faithful | & most obedient humble Servt | J Oldmixon  
Cust<sup>o</sup> H<sup>o</sup> Bridgwater 25th March 1719.

This dispatch gives a clear sense of the obstacles faced by a government servant in a region where disaffection was rife. Oldmixon perhaps couched things in an unduly melodramatic fashion, as he generally did; but at a time when political conflict was expressed in more brutal and open ways, such naked aggression was a real enough feature of life.

Two days later, Oldmixon reported that the worst of the fears had been allayed. He first mentioned that he had remitted a large sum to the Receiver-General of the Customs (Francis Hawes, later deeply implicated in the South Sea Bubble).<sup>23</sup> Apparently this was done with the deliberate intent of reducing the cash held at Bridgwater. The letter proceeds: 'I am now easy on yt Account & indeed on all Others with Respect to ye Invasion. The very Jacobites who are worth any Thing do not like it & are afraid Spaniards and Irishmen will only distinguish those that have from those that have not. We are very quiet & Peoples Apprehensions Lessen dayly.' However, the security

<sup>20</sup> George Knyfton held the posts of Waiter and Searcher at Uphill: see Establishment Lists (Bristol), P.R.O. Customs 18/129, f. 39. The Collector for Bristol was Jacob Reynardson (d. 1720). The 'creek' referred to is doubtless the estuary of the Axe, which enters the Bristol Channel near Weston.

<sup>21</sup> *Sc.* Jacobite.

<sup>22</sup> The last seven words (like the word 'Swede' near the start) are written in a larger script, evidently corresponding to italicization.

<sup>23</sup> Hawes became joint Receiver-General and Cashier of the Customs, with 'old' Horace Walpole, in June 1716 — during the same week as Oldmixon received his post as Collector: *Calendar of Treasury Books . . . 1716*, ed. Shaw (London, 1957), 247, 250. He was a director of the South Sea Company from 1714 to 1721, and heavily fined for his share in the Bubble operation. See P.G.M. Dickson, *The Financial Revolution in England 1688-1756* (London, 1967), 117, 119, 187. Oldmixon refers to him in a letter of 29 October 1720 to Jacob Tonson jr. (B.M. Add. MS. 28275, f. 133).

aspects were taken seriously enough for this letter also to be forwarded to the Under-Secretary of State.<sup>24</sup>

This happened a third time with the letter which survives in transcription. By the start of April, the invasion had come to appear a chimerical threat to many, as Oldmixon ruefully acknowledges.

Hond Srs | Nothing in the world is so great a Satisfaction to me as that my poor Services are acceptable in any thing to yr Hons Tho the Justices did not think fit to secure the fellow I mentioned as a suspected Spye on Acct of the Inconsistencies in his Information I was then & am still of Opinion he was a great Rogue of one kind or other & he proved so going off in his Shallop under pretence of fishing to sea & returning no more.

My small Estate being within a mile of this place when I have received the Establishment & transmitted my Abstract to yr Hns I shall be obliged to go thither & I will then strictly examine the country abt it for yr Hons can hardly think how the faction & some weak [ ] represent the projected Invasion as an Amusement of the Governmt with a View of getting money to idle & malicious [ ] in their wicked reflections. I am | Hond Srs | Yr Honrs | most hum: most obed: & faithfull | Servn J. Oldmixon Customhouse. Bridgwater. | 8 April 1719<sup>25</sup>

As suggested earlier, some informing activities seem to have been expected of customs officers in the course of their ordinary duties. Oldmixon therefore may have had some legitimate cause for grievance when no attention appears to have been paid to his messages, beyond the formal reference to Delafaye (they were obviously intended for Secretary of State Stanhope's eyes). At all events we hear no more of the affair.<sup>26</sup> Oldmixon was doubtless left to his ordinary tasks, watching for smugglers and collecting the revenues, for which he was paid £15 twice a year.<sup>27</sup> In addition, he was busy on a number of literary enterprises, most of which did not reach print. Amongst these the most interesting was a sort of 'Victoria County History' for Tonson, evidently a rival project to the successful *Magna Britannia*. Oldmixon spent some years gathering material for this project.<sup>28</sup> Somerset was one of the counties he finished, along with Cornwall and Devon. Bristol was included in the former county, and he enlisted the help of the Town Clerk of that city, John Romsey. Evidently Dorset was also to follow, since Oldmixon mentions aid he has received from the Town Clerk of Lyme Regis concerning Lyme and

<sup>24</sup> P.R.O. SP 35/15/129. Charles Carkesse sent this letter on to Delafaye with a covering note stating that it related to certain information Carkesse had given Lord Sunderland (First Lord of the Treasury) the previous week, and that it was to be brought to the attention of the Secretary of State, Lord Stanhope. I can find no trace in the Secretary's letterbooks of any further action.

<sup>25</sup> P.R.O., SP 35/16/16(1). This letter, too, was passed on by Carkesse to Delafaye for the notice of Stanhope. The transcript is in a clerk's hand. G. A. Aitken was presumably thinking of this dispatch when he wrote in his article in *D.N.B.* that Oldmixon was acting as a kind of secret service agent in Bridgwater; but, as suggested, his surveillance was a side aspect of his general customs work.

<sup>26</sup> On 21 March 1719, Samuel Buckley reported to Stanhope that the fears of a Jacobite invasion had been exaggerated. In a deliberately anti-alarmist letter, Buckley wrote that he could find few signs of the cadres of disaffected men, which had allegedly grown up, and he amusingly plays down the fears caused by visits by Sir William Wyndham to Dorchester and other Tories to Blandford. Buckley had stopped at Bridgwater on his way to Bath.

<sup>27</sup> P.R.O. Customs 18/129, f. 36, for example — the establishment for Christmas 1720. A further £2 10. 0 was allowed 'for a clerk'.

<sup>28</sup> See letters in B.M., Add. MS. 28275, ff. 84, 95, 133; Edinburgh University Library, MS. La. II. 423/181-2. These cover the period from November 1717 to October 1720.

Bridport.<sup>29</sup> Tonson must have had second thoughts about the idea, and a large part of Oldmixon's correspondence at this period is taken up with efforts to get some recompense — he whines, cajoles, blusters ('As to Somersetshire A Bookseller has spoken to me & made me a considerable Offer . . .'), but his real object, it would seem, was to encourage the bookseller to go ahead with the scheme, vainly as it turned out.

The letter from which I have just quoted, written to the younger Tonson in January 1720, concludes in a most intriguing way. Oldmixon asks Tonson to give his services to two men, 'Mr. Watts and Mr. Jones'. The former was John Watts, the celebrated printer, who was responsible for many of Tonson's more sumptuous productions. Jones is unidentified.<sup>30</sup> 'Tell them,' adds Oldmixon, 'I have in my Cellars 400 hods of French wine, & 100 Puncheons of Brandy. But another Man keeps the Key.' Now this undoubtedly alludes to an episode recorded by Atton and Holland in their history of the customs service. These authorities quote a report from the Collector at Bridgwater, to the effect that a Hamburg ship had gone aground near his precinct. No less than 370 hogsheads of wine, 98 puncheons of brandy and 200 bags of chestnuts were salvaged and secured under the charge of the customs — what bacchanalia this unfortunate accident deferred, we are not told. The citation goes on in the unmistakable Oldmixonian accents: 'the rabble of the place prevented the shipment of the goods, broke into the Customs cellars, and helped themselves to several casks of wine and brandy.' Whereupon the Board in London offered a reward for the apprehension of the rioters, sent two revenue sloops to the site to protect the goods, and suggested that a troop of soldiers be sent, as foreigners were known to be maltreated by the constables in this part of the world.<sup>31</sup> This, too, looks like a hint from Oldmixon. The later developments can be followed out in a number of documents amongst the Treasury Board archives.<sup>32</sup> The situation had all the makings of a real polemical holiday for Oldmixon, with plenty of scope for his caustic appraisals of the local population.

Plainly, the even tenor of life which we associate with provincial England of the Georgian era had been little in evidence since Oldmixon's arrival as collector. If it did prevail briefly (as is highly unlikely), this peace was shattered abruptly the next year. The summer of 1721 saw a tumult rather like that described by Mr. Slocombe for the year 1717. This riot was if anything uglier than the other. Its occasion was the presence

<sup>29</sup> The Town Clerk of Bristol at this time was John Romsey (d. 1720/1). Information kindly supplied by Miss Elizabeth Ralph, City Archivist of Bristol. The Town Clerk of Weymouth, who also assisted, was T. Cooper (information from Mr. J. A. C. West, Chief Librarian to the Borough). The Town Clerk of Lyme Regis cannot be identified.

<sup>30</sup> Jones is mentioned elsewhere in Oldmixon's correspondence: he may be the historian's cousin Moses Jones, or conceivably Rees Jones, a periwig-maker of Bartholomew Close, elsewhere involved with Oldmixon.

<sup>31</sup> Henry Atton, H. H. Holland, *The King's Customs* (London, 1908), I, 186-187.

<sup>32</sup> See PRO, T 1/230/68 ff. The material includes a report from the Customs Commissioners to the Treasury, a letter to Oldmixon, dated 4 February 1720, from the same body, and other directives by them. What action the Treasury took does not appear. Oldmixon had evidently sent a number of messages as the position worsened, and the salvaged cargo was increasingly threatened. The letter from the Commissioners (f.70) mentions dispatches by Oldmixon dated 28 January and 1 February; in it, Oldmixon is instructed to repair to Bristol to confer with the customs officers of that port. The plan was for some of the cargo to be disposed of in Bristol by a local merchant, Walter Hawksworth, the proceeds to be set against the salvage charges. The Severn sloop and a smack from Ilfracombe, in the Revenue service, were to stand by; and Oldmixon was told to use all the legal powers at his disposal to prevent further thefts. It emerges from the Commissioners' report that the ship was the *Little Henry*, bound for Bordeaux; it had run aground as far back as the previous November (hence the mounting greed of the "rabble", perhaps), and lay off Berrow.

of a large troop of the military in Bridgwater at one of the recurrent flashpoint dates—10 June. As good a way as any to explain this circumstance (allowing for his political prejudice) is to quote what Oldmixon himself wrote fifteen years later:

These Marks of Distinction [affected by the Tories] were particularly *Oaken Boughs*, on the 29th of *May*, being the *Anniversary* of the *Restoration* of King *Charles*; which by restoring the Royal Family of the *Stuarts*, made way for the *Protestant Succession*, a Blessing that makes us forget the Grievances under which this Nation groan'd from that *Restoration* to the *Revolution*. Another Distinction of that frantic desperate *Faction* was their wearing *White Roses* on the Tenth of *June*, the Day on which the *First Pretender* is said to have come into the World. We need not say, the *Fools* of the *Faction*, it will be understood without mention, were so Impudent on those two Days this Year [1717] in *London* and other Parts of the Kingdom, that it not only provok'd the Indignation of the Soldiers, but of others, who strip'd them of the Badges of their Folly, and drub'd them, upon Opposition, into better Manners.

One such outburst no doubt took place in Bridgwater in 1717, a month prior to the affray which Mr. Slocombe describes. It is virtually certain that Oldmixon had this in mind when he continued:

In a Western Borough certain Pragmatical Sons of High-Church and Seditions, then in the Magistracy, strutted about with their *White Roses*, and spirited their Companions among the Dregs of the People to Insult the Friends of the Government.<sup>33</sup>

So good a friend of the government, in and out of season, can hardly have been a neutral bystander. Nor did he pretend to be so, when trouble broke out four years later. This was the most dramatic juncture in Oldmixon's tenure of the Bridgwater post, with political passion and physical violence equally compounded. Predictably, Oldmixon saw fit to report the events to his masters. The exact recipient is uncertain: I would tentatively hazard the name of Delafaye.<sup>34</sup> In this case we have something of a check on the accuracy of Oldmixon's statements, lurid as they appear in places, because an official enquiry was instituted into the riot. Partial and near-paranoic as Oldmixon is, there is evidence to show that his graphic account of the events is reliable in its broad outline and even (where a check has been possible) in detail. Two letters are preserved in the P.R.O., and long as they are, they merit reproduction in full.

John Oldmixon to [?Charles Delafaye]

Sr | I think it my Duty to inform you that the People of this Place have behavd with their usual Insolence and Disloyalty on Occasion of the 10th of June. One of the

<sup>33</sup> Oldmixon, *History of England* (1735), 618.

<sup>34</sup> Delafaye seems the most likely candidate on these grounds. (1) The letter is found amongst the general business correspondence of the Under-Secretary. Delafaye transacted a good deal of secret service business, in addition to modern 'Home Office' affairs. The reports on the riots in Bridgwater (SP 35/27) certainly received his attention. (2) Carkesse, as observed, had sent on Oldmixon's letters to Delafaye during 1719. (3) It is known that Delafaye was regarded as an effective wirepuller in the matter of appointments and the like. One must concede that the tone of the second letter is more humble than one would expect in a communication to a relatively junior minister. The recipient cannot have been a peer, as the form of address makes clear — this rules out Townshend, Carteret and other possible candidates. Conceivable names are those of George Dodington, who became Lord Lieutenant of Somerset in 1721, and M.P. for Bridgwater in the following year; Paul Methuen (see note 46); Anthony Cracherode (see note 46); Carkesse himself; Brian Fairfax, a friend of Burlington who served as a Customs Commissioner and subscribed to Oldmixon's history; and Robert Walpole. But I believe that all things considered Delafaye is the likeliest person.

Ald<sup>n</sup> & a part of the Common Council at the Desire of Lieut<sup>n</sup> Coll Hamilton of Honeywoods Dragoons<sup>35</sup> made an Order against tumults & wearing White Roses & desired the Mayor Jonathan Thomas<sup>36</sup> to publish it instead of which Himself, His Cryer & Clerk of the Market got out of Town to the Key Stuck over with White Roses to encourage the Like Insolence in the Rabble. Early in the Morning They placd a Garland of the Same Roses & Oak to which they added Horns at the Officers Quarters, & Another of the same kind on the Cornhill.<sup>37</sup> The Lieut<sup>n</sup> Coll appointed strict Guard all the Day & the Soldiers with Sticks in their Hands walkt up & down to prevent such Insults to the Governmt. In the Shambles a Drum<sup>38</sup> taking away a Rose from a Butcher's Wife was attackd but made his Party good agst 5 or 6 of the Fraternity till Relief came. As this Last of the Town is the glory of the Faction & the Mayors Wife<sup>39</sup> had boasted to the Coll that he durst not send his Men into the Shambles, It was extream Mortification to Them to have the Drum come off with such Honour & it seems they took Care to be better provided in Eastover<sup>40</sup> where one [Farley] an overseer of the Poor pulld out a Pistoll & offerd to fire at the Soldiers, who were on the Reconnoitre that Way. A Serjt took away his fire Arms & broke his Head with his Cudgell.<sup>41</sup> He was also brought before the Coll & confind to the Guard all Night. The Mayor Alderman & Depy Recorder refusing to hear the Case till this Morning 10 oClock on Purpose, I suppose, to send such a Representation as they think fit of the Matter, before Coll Hamilton and have his Dispatches our Post going out about that Time, But he has been beforehand with Them & sent the Ministry his Account by this Post.<sup>42</sup> I am satisfyd there is not so Incurrigible a Set of Men in all that Vile Party & how they shoud grow better I can't imagine when care is taken to enflame them from above. That very Paper for which Mist is now in Question<sup>43</sup> was sent to the Mayor [frankly *inserted*] by a Gentleman with this Recommendation that the three half penny Price was mounted to 6 Shillings, as I have heard from a good Hand in Confidence.

<sup>35</sup> P.R.O., SP 35/27/23. Archibald Hamilton was a Lieutenant-Colonel in Lord Mountjoy's regiment of foot in 1711: [Guy Miège], *The Present State of Great Britain*, 1, 412. He transferred to Honeywood's regiment by July 1715, served at Preston, and reached the rank of Lieutenant-General. He died in 1749: Charles Dalton, *George the First's Army* (London, 1910), 1, 115. Brigadier (later General Sir Philip) Honeywood is best remembered as a member of Marlborough's faction and an opponent of the Harley regime (see, for instance, G. M. Trevelyan, *The Peace and the Protestant Succession* [London, 1934], 114). He was Colonel of the eleventh Hussars from 1715 to 1732. He died in 1752.

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Thomas was Mayor of Bridgwater in 1713 and 1721: S. G. Jarman, *A History of Bridgwater* (London/St. Ives, 1889), 271.

<sup>37</sup> This is of course the open space at the centre of Bridgwater, surviving today. It is located some two or three hundred yards west of the Parret, and a similar distance from Oldmixon's later residence in Castle Street. St. Mary's Church, where the Oldmixon family tomb can still be seen, stands only a few yards westward.

<sup>38</sup> The drum was possibly one Thomas Howes (SP 35/27/57).

<sup>39</sup> Mary Thomas was among those to make a statement before the Mayor, her husband, and Alderman Robert Steare (SP 35/27/54).

<sup>40</sup> Nowadays the street continuing along the axis of Fore Street on the eastern side of the Town Bridge. Oldmixon possibly uses the name to designate the eastern part of Bridgwater generally; at that time, the town proper was concentrated on the western bank of the river, and land on the opposite bank might have been regarded as a suburb.

<sup>41</sup> The sergeant was possibly James Dixon (SP 35/27/15).

<sup>42</sup> Hamilton's reports are preserved in SP 35/27/15, 57. In substance they agree with Oldmixon's account.

<sup>43</sup> Nathaniel Mist, of *Journal* fame, was arrested about the start of June in connection with an inflammatory article by Charles Molloy in the issue for 27 May — W. T. Laprade, *Public Opinion and Politics in Eighteenth Century England* (New York, 1936), 248. He was kept in Newgate for some months (Hanson, 34, 44-45). Delafaye had drawn up a memorandum in 1718 regarding the *Journal*, after which Mist was examined by Stanhope and James Craggs. See Hanson, 104-105. On 26 July 1718 the *Journal* had published a reasonably good-humoured attack on Oldmixon.

Sr | The Letter I wrote to the Commissioners of the Customes<sup>44</sup> has had no other Effect as Yet than a Reprimand from them to me & the Dep Controller for not sending that Account before which we could easily answer if we were to talk with Commrs. Mr Hill<sup>45</sup> almost out of Heart but I tell him I believe the Affair is in a very good Way and that He may hope to hear of it in due Time.

Mr Meth[w]en<sup>46</sup> will do himself the Honour to wait on You in a few Days & I shall talk with him before he sets out which will be on [?a] Thursday.

I am with the Utmost Respect & Gratitude | Your most faithful most Obedient | and most obligd humble Servant | J Oldmixon

Custo Ho Bridgwater | 1 [3?] June 1721

*Endorsed in another hand:* Mr Oldmixon June the 16th 1721

Despite the warmth which had been generated, events seem to have moved at a leisurely pace. It was apparently another fortnight before Oldmixon took his narrative further, addressing the same unknown correspondent in London:

Sir | I am desird by Mr Hill in the most humble & sensible Manner to return You his dutifull Acknowledgements for the great Favour You have been pleased to obtain for him in the Deputation of which he is now in Possession. The whole service of his Life will be devoted to You, & Little Enough to make a suitable Return to such an uncommon Obligation, He not having the Honour to be known to You. Mr Balch<sup>47</sup> will by this Last express his Sentiments of it, which I doubt not are answerable to the Merits of so generous an Action.

Sir, | It is at his Desire & the Earnest Entreaties of the King's Friends in this Town that I presume to continue the Advice I gave in my Last of the Riot here on the 10th of June.

As I then hinted Coll Hamilton of Brigadier Honeywoods Regimt of Dragoons, wrote to the Ministry, & by Mondays Post a letter came to him from Lord Townshend<sup>48</sup> intimating that his Majty approved of the Colls Zeal and Conduct and directing a farther Act of the Affair, to see if the Rioters should be prosecuted at the Kings Charge. Another Letter came from his Lordsp to the Mayor and they keep the Contents of it very secret, yet I understand the Substance is to direct them to explain Themselves why an Order of the Mayor & Common Council drawn up by Aldn Steare himself was not published as they promised Instead of which the Mayor & his Officers, employ on those Occasions, withdrew Themselves. This Order was to prevent wearing White Roses. What else there is in the Mayor's Letter I cannot Learn but they have

<sup>44</sup> This letter has not been traced. Oldmixon was in perpetual difficulties over money, largely owing to his propensity for confusing public with private expenditure.

<sup>45</sup> William Hill was deputed to the post of Landwaiter for the port of Bridgwater on 13 June 1721: P.R.O. T 11/17, f. 418.

<sup>46</sup> Probably Robert Methwen, a local solicitor and member of the Council who also held minor offices in Bristol. He was a notably litigious man and (like Oldmixon) at constant loggerheads with the Corporation. Alderman Steare spoke of him as a disturber of public tranquility. See I. M. Slocombe, *loc. cit.*, 74-75. A conceivable, but less plausible, name would be that of Paul Methuen, the noted diplomat, who was not knighted till 1725, and who had close links with Dodington amongst others.

Incidentally, Anthony Cracherode, solicitor to the Treasury, did report to Delafaye on the state of affairs in Bridgwater, a little later in the summer (letter of 13 July 1721, SP 35/27/81). Cracherode was another to subscribe to Oldmixon's history.

<sup>47</sup> P.R.O., SP 35/27/59. Probably George Balch, Mayor of Bridgwater in 1699 and 1709 (Jarman, 271), also among the list of subscribers.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Viscount Townshend (1674-1738), Secretary of State for the Northern Department.

ever since been practising their Old Way of Affidavits with which I suppose they rather intend to perplex than clear the Matter.

Coll Hamilton had with good precaution orderd the Dragoons to be drawn up in the Morning and sent a Guard to a Post assignd by the Magistrates, which Guard were pelted with Stones in their March thither and this Sir was the beginning of the Riot. The Soldiers finding that Post not convenient were returning to the Cross, & a Drum going through the Shambles the Butchers fell upon Him. The Coll Himself passing that way afterwards the same Butchers took up their Cleavers & ripping Knives<sup>49</sup> as the Mayoress had threatend if they were disturbd in their White Roses, & said they woud cut his Dragoons to Pieces if they came there or Words to that Effect of which Coll Hamilton has made an Affidavit.

They had early in the Morning hung out a Garland of White Roses on the Cornhill & Another such Garland decorated with Horns at the Colls Quarters which with other Acts of Insolence & Sedition, continud all the Day, did indeed put some of the Soldiers so out of Temper towards the Evening that they banged two or three of the Offenders & broke 2 or 3 Panes of Glass, for which Coll Hamilton gave them immediately more Satisfaction than they desird & laid a side all Thoughts of prosecuting One of the Fellows, Who was taken with a Pistol loaden & primd in his Pocket. But notwithstanding this Satisfaction all the Magistrates do so justifie their Conduct as to spirit up those very Persons to make New Affidavits of Injuries<sup>50</sup> for Which they have been much over paid in procuring those Oaths, which make not the least Relation to their refusing to publish the Order of [Common *inserted*] Council, nor to the Moving Insults nor to the Riot in & near the Shambles, Nor to the Mayors Wife & Children Marching about Town & even strutting with their White Roses, They aggravate as far as they are capable the Soldiers beating of some of the Accomplices of the Rioters & I am informd money has not been wanting to encourage the Swearers which they are certainly the best provided with of any Body of Men in England, as appeard sufficiently in the Corporation Cause[s?].

By this You will perceive, Sir, that the Charge of Disaffection stands good against them & that they are incorrigible in it. This will also confirm the just Character given of them in former Representations to the King & Council. His Majesty has lately heard how they are affected to him. The Ministers have it fresh in Consideration, Their Charter is declar'd Void by the most Able Lawyers, for Want of a regular Surrender of the Old One. The Matter is gone through already & their Demerits notorious.

It is not for me to draw any Conclusions from these Premises but in the Name of Honest Men for whom I write most humbly to assure You of the Utmost Devotion on All Occasions to Your Service & Interest

I am with Respect & Gratitude | Sir | Yr most Obedient, most faithful | & most obligd Humble Servant | J Oldmixon

Customehouse Bridwater | 1 July 1721

*Endorsed in another hand:* Mr Oldmixon July the 3d 1721

What the recipient, whoever he was, made of this is not known. Oldmixon is as ever credulous, bitter and partial. None the less, Hamilton's own reports confirm a good deal

<sup>49</sup> This melodramatic touch finds confirmation in Hamilton's report (SP 35/27/57).

<sup>50</sup> Many such depositions were laid before Thomas and Steare, as testified by SP 35/27/52-54.

of what he says. Such 'Insolence and Seditious' was obviously not confined to Bridgwater, but the borough did have a long history of factional disturbance. Its highflying Corporation did its best to provoke the ministry on more than one occasion. It was very likely no accident that Oldmixon was sent to the town in the first place. Apart from his being a local man (so that he could sometimes supply particular information, as with the Swedish fisherman), and the fact that it was a long way from London (Oldmixon was a perpetual embarrassment and unwearied in his lobbying activities), there was the consideration outlined earlier. The trained journalist would be of most value in a notorious trouble spot like Bridgwater. Finally, Oldmixon had once enjoyed some electoral influence, possibly deriving from his uncle Sir John Bawden.<sup>51</sup> As the present letter makes clear, *that* was something he was no longer able to exercise with any visible authority. Within a few years the borough came into the control of George Bubb Dodington, whose literary (if not political) patronage Oldmixon himself received in a desultory way. Meanwhile Bridgwater, like most of Somerset, continued to bear the reputation of a hotbed of Jacobitism and disaffection at large. That Squire Western should have hailed from the county is not less significant because (as is now generally agreed) the Squire was a mythical figure. It is on the contrary more significant for that very reason.

What of the observer whose accounts we have been considering? Sadly, life became no easier for the fiercely combative Oldmixon. His solace lay in the compilation of a long series of fervent Whiggish histories, along with associated controversial pamphlets. Later in the 1720's he added another string to his well-worn literary bow, with the appearance of books on criticism and rhetoric. In the meantime he had become acquainted with the Duke of Chandos, then extending his curiously assorted commercial interests into Bridgwater.<sup>52</sup> The princely Duke's first local agent, John Payne, proved inefficient; and Oldmixon's own unkind reports with regard to Payne no doubt contributed to the latter's dismissal, around 1726, and his replacement by Oldmixon. The author was even asked to come in as a nominal partner in one business set up by Chandos with his usual cautious-looking profligacy — namely, a glasshouse in the town. Oldmixon was employed principally to supervise the erection of modern Castle Street and other buildings in the riverside area. One house on the north side of the street was indeed set aside as a Customs House. But, predictably in view of the character of the two principals, the alliance did not last. From the start of Oldmixon's occupation there were disputes about the rent; in the end Chandos was obliged to send Oldmixon curt letters of demand, quite unlike his usual urbane effusions. Worse, Oldmixon had been quite as unsatisfactory as Payne in performing his duties. He had not kept a proper account of the outlay on the new development, and he had made a series of errors which depleted even the well-lined pocket of his employer. By 1728 Chandos was threatening a suit against Oldmixon, and soon there was yet another local agent, John Cope.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> See *Memoirs of the Press*, 32. For Bawden see note 15 above.

<sup>52</sup> For a full account of the Duke's activities in the town, see C. H. Collins Baker and Muriel I. Baker, *The Life and Circumstances of James Brydges, First Duke of Chandos* (Oxford, 1949), 221 ff.

<sup>53</sup> The story can be traced in the letters from Chandos to Oldmixon, now in the Huntington Library, San Marino, Cal. The relevant materials are found in MSS. ST/57/24-41. A microfilm of this correspondence is located at Bridgwater Public Library: I am grateful to the Borough Librarian, Mr. A. Dunn, and his assistant, Miss N. Williams, for allowing me to study this material, both *in situ* and on deposit at Cambridge University Library. Mr. T. Hedley Barry of Bridgwater supplied valuable information regarding the Chandos archives.

All this while, with half his mind on soapmaking and lime supplies, and the other on English constitutional history, Oldmixon was, of course, making a sorry mess of his real post. Again things went from bad to worse. He lost a pension granted him for his political pamphleteering services, and though Queen Caroline had this restored on the intercession of James Johnstone, it lapsed once more. In 1735 he discovered that he was in debt to the Customs to the tune of £1,100, a sum later reduced by accounting chicanery to £350. This debt was cleared by a grant from the royal bounty in 1736, and Oldmixon officially left his post in that year. But he had returned to London at least three years previously. His last years do not concern us, but the Treasury papers in the P.R.O. show us that he was dogged almost to the end by the financial indiscretions of his Bridgwater years.<sup>54</sup> His final known letter was written in blindness, lameness and squalor — most probably from a sponging-house.<sup>55</sup> For once there was a glimmer of luck: the Duke of Newcastle heeded this, one among the thousands of pleas offered up to him, and Oldmixon's immediate distress was evidently relieved.

By contrast with this pitiful end, it is almost a pleasant experience to contemplate Oldmixon's early years as Collector. He describes the events that passed before him in Bridgwater with obvious partiality; but his accounts have brio and graphic urgency about them. Much of the best occasional writing is carried out by people who want something done. And in those troubled times, Oldmixon assuredly fell into that category; he wished to see the highflying corporation dislodged, the Jacobite rabble disciplined, his own injured merits recognised. If we want a lively picture of Bridgwater in the first years of the Hanoverian dynasty, then his letters are the best source available. Nobody now believes in the settled Georgian calm, any more than in the peace of the Augustans. Here John Oldmixon, the chronicler of a troubled English past in his public works, registers with almost hysterical urgency that tumultuous present which eighteenth-century Somerset was in the process of living.

<sup>54</sup> See *Memoirs of the Press*, passim, and P.R.O., T 11/21/174, 307; T 11/15/165; T 52/29/250; IND. 4625/146.

<sup>55</sup> B.M., Add. MS. 32697, f. 308.