Bramhall, John

by John McCafferty

Bramhall, John (1594–1663), Church of Ireland bishop, was born in Pontefract, Yorkshire, England, and baptised there in St Giles's church on 18 November 1594, eldest among six children of Peter Bramhall, Carleton, Pontefract. His mother's name is not known. He attended Pontefract grammar school and then proceeded to Cambridge, where he was admitted to Sidney Sussex College on 21 February 1609. He took his BA (1612) and MA (1616), followed by a BD (1623). In the meantime he was ordained deacon and then priest by Archbishop Toby Matthew in York Minster in, respectively, December 1615 and December 1616.

Early career On 2 August 1617 Bramhall became rector of St Martin's Micklegate in York. On 24 June 1618 he was presented to the rectory of South Kilvington near Thirsk by Christopher Wandesforde (qv), whose continued patronage was probably the cause of his later transfer to Ireland. He married (10 November 1618) a widow, Eleanor Collingwood (née Halley), who brought with her the library of her deceased husband. They had three sons and three daughters.

During the 1620s John Bramhall's career was one of sustained, if unspectacular, advancement. He became a precentor of Ripon cathedral on 20 March 1623 and subdean in 1624. He was granted mastership of the hospital of St John the Baptist in 1625. In 1623 an unlicensed public disputation with two catholic priests at Northallerton earned him a rebuke from Archbishop Matthew. For Bramhall, as for many of his contemporaries, the prospect of a Spanish match for Prince Charles was a cause of considerable anxiety. Two years earlier, in 1621, he had preached against papal jurisdiction to York convocation. In 1630 he was appointed to the high commission at York. This appointment came at about the same time as he successfully defended his Cambridge doctoral dissertation on the papacy as the cause of all of the greatest controversies in Christendom. In 1632, thanks to the influence of the lord president of the council of the north, Sir Thomas Wentworth (qv), and that of William Laud, bishop of London, he was appointed to the crown prebend of Huishtwaite. For the remainder of the 1630s his relationship with these two patrons determined the course of his public life.

Ireland; rises to become bishop of Derry On 23 July 1633 he landed at Dublin alongside Christopher Wandesforde and Thomas Wentworth, the lord deputy elect. His first pulpit appearance as chaplain to the chief governor was at Christ Church cathedral on 4 August 1633, preaching on the text ‘Tu es Petrus’ (‘Thou art Peter’). He now maintained, in line with an increasingly fashionable view, that the church of Rome was merely schismatical and that the pope could even be considered a patriarch. This was a direct shot across the bows of the Church of Ireland and its primate James Ussher (qv), who staunchly maintained the Roman pontiff to be
Antichrist. In addition, the Irish articles of 1615 had declared the pope to be such. Bramhall, however, was not dependent on the goodwill of Irish church figures but rather on Dublin Castle and Archbishop Laud. That this was so is clear when his frequent letters to the new archbishop of Canterbury on the temporal, spiritual, and doctrinal condition of the established church Ireland are set against his swift and spectacular promotion. On 3 September 1633 he became treasurer at Christ Church and by October he had gained the very lucrative archdeaconry of Meath by royal patent. On 9 May 1634 he was nominated to the see of Derry in succession to George Downham (qv) and consecrated in the chapel of Dublin Castle on 26 May by Ussher of Armagh, Anthony Martin of Meath, Robert Echlin (qv) of Down and Connor, and Richard Boyle (qv) of Cork.

Despite the fact that he did not become a member of the privy council under Wentworth, John Bramhall acquired a position of unique influence in the governance of Ireland. This was due, in part, to the unswerving support he was given by the lord deputy but was mainly due to his efficiency and thoroughness as an administrator. Given the poor state of Irish archives, his ability to gather, interpret, and analyse land records and leases was extraordinary. During the regal visitation of Munster in 1634 Bramhall arrived at what proved to be an unswerving analysis of the economic situation of the Irish church. His view was that ecclesiastical fortunes had been seriously damaged by corrupt and collusive leasing combined with a complete lack of up-to-date and accurate taxation and rental books for dioceses. A dispute over church lands in Munster held by the earl of Cork (qv) and promoted by Wentworth has been the most famous of all of the temporalities cases of the 1630s but, in fact, represents only one of many suits taken by the lord deputy using prerogative powers. Bramhall was involved in this series of highly publicised cases beginning in Killaloe and Clonfert and coming to involve a range of individuals ranging from prominent figures such as the earls of Clanricarde (qv) and Ormond (qv) down to modest farmers of church lands. The purpose of every case was to improve clerical revenue.

The bishop of Derry also had a major hand in drafting four acts concerning temporalities for the 1634–5 parliament. This legislation gave statutory expression to his approach to church landholding by creating an enforceable universal system which rendered collusive or destructive leasing virtually impossible and instigated a proper system of record-keeping. Outside parliament he initiated a scheme for buying in impropriations and appropriations (that is, revenues from benefices transferred to the laity or corporations) and returning the revenues to the church. This campaign was given momentum by a crown grant restoring royal appropriations to the Church of Ireland in April 1635. Bramhall himself regarded the successful restoration of a distinct diocese of Cloyne after a 200-year lapse in 1638 as a particular triumph, since it rested on his overturn of a suspect fee-farm. Glowing reports throughout the 1630s of a renaissance in church revenues did mask the fact that Bramhall’s activities as agent and negotiator were causing considerable tension. Both catholic and protestant landowners identified him as the clerical incarnation of
Wentworth's policy of more efficient and more demanding government of the Irish kingdom.

Reorganising the episcopate The major preoccupation of Bramhall's Irish career in the 1630s was to oversee a reendowment and strengthening of the episcopate. In turn, defence of the episcopal order was to become central to his polemical writings in the 1640s and 1650s. Then, in the restoration period, he went on to oversee the triumphal reestablishment of the Irish bench of bishops. His strenuous efforts at putting the clerical estate on a firm financial footing could not but please his colleagues, but at the same time his style of churchmanship caused them some unease. Bramhall's views on papal authority created a concomitant emphasis on what he himself dubbed 'the Britannic churches'. Unsurprisingly this led him to believe that the Church of Ireland's main deficiency lay in its lack of formal resemblance to the contemporary Church of England. Put simply, he was not happy that the thirty-nine articles had not been adopted on the smaller island, nor with the fact that the Church of Ireland had no code of canons. Accordingly he was a strong advocate, in the Irish convocation which began on 21 July 1634, for wholesale adoption of the English canons of 1604. The fifth of these canons required clergy to subscribe to the thirty-nine articles. While there can be little doubt that he found much of the theological tone of the Irish articles of 1615 distasteful, his main impulse in pressing for their replacement was primarily legal and constitutional, as he believed that an episcopal settlement, claiming apostolic origin, and independent of Rome was divinely ordained for Britain and Ireland.

Many of his fellow bishops and the majority of the lower or clergy house of convocation interpreted his approach (which was also that of Wentworth and Laud) somewhat differently. They saw an assault, and wished to uphold the 1615 statement as being entirely consistent with the thirty-nine articles. There was also an attempt to scrutinise the 1604 canons with a view to the composition of a distinct Irish set. In the end, after a savage encounter between the lord deputy and convocation, there was compromise of sorts. A new Irish canon utterly bypassed the 1615 articles, leaving them neither denied nor confirmed. Bramhall, relaxing his earlier campaign to have the English canons adopted without alternation, spotted an opportunity. While his opponents scored some points on sabbath day observance, catechetical method, and liturgical dress, the new code gave canonical status to a number of Laudian desiderata. Ministerial subscription was now based not only on the thirty-nine articles but also on the Book of Common Prayer. Communion tables were to be placed altarwise at the east end of the church, silver cups were made mandatory, and there was even provision for auricular confession. The weakness of provisions for the Irish language in the canons has sometimes been blamed on Bramhall, but it is far more likely that the very lukewarm provision for conduct of service through Irish and for bibles and prayer books are a reflection of the Church of Ireland's own ambiguity towards the language at this time.
Impeachment and civil war In 1636 Bramhall was appointed to a revived Irish court of high commission, where he was a leading member. Despite intense speculation during 1638 he did not succeed Adam Loftus (qv) as lord chancellor. His position was very much that of chief agent for church affairs under Thomas Wentworth. It was a role which he executed with unremitting diligence. The Irish church contained large numbers of Scots protestant planters, and in dealing with them Bramhall blended his native northern English prejudices with his dislike of what he deemed to be defiant nonconformity and irregularity. In a set-piece ‘conference’ in August 1636 between himself and Henry Leslie (qv) of Down and Connor on the one hand and a number of prominent Scots clergy on the other, Bramhall acquitted himself robustly. He was even responsible for the decision of a group of Scottish ministers to set sail for America. Later Scottish sources make careful contrast between Archbishop Ussher's apparent flexibility and understanding of their scruples concerning the established church, and Bishop Bramhall's rigidity and hostility. For his part, Bramhall took great care in his relations with the primate, his formal superior, and devoted much attention to recovery of Armagh see revenues. Following the Scottish national covenant in 1640, Bramhall's hostility to the Scots became even more overt. Yet, like many of his contemporaries, he did not anticipate rebellion or civil wars. He regarded the initially compliant Irish parliament of 1640 as a perfect opportunity to bring in even more legislation governing church temporalities.

Events took an opposite turn. On 17 June the Irish commons presented a long list of grievances about clerical exactions; on 7 November they declared the court of high commission as an especial grievance in a formal remonstrance. On 3 December Christopher Wandesforde, Bramhall's first patron, died in office as lord deputy. On 5 December John Atherton (qv), bishop of Waterford and Lismore, a leading proponent of recent ecclesiastical policies, was hanged for sodomy in Dublin. On 27 February 1641, following a parliamentary protestation against Wentworth's viceroyalty, a commons committee was appointed to draw up charges for the impeachment of Bramhall, Lord Chancellor Sir Richard Bolton (qv), Lord Chief Justice Sir Gerard Lowther (qv), and Sir George Radcliffe (qv). When the articles of impeachment were entered into the record of the lower house on 4 March, a row immediately blew up over whether the Irish parliament had the competence to mount such a proceeding. As far as Bramhall was concerned the process finally petered out in April 1644, but at the time the commons achieved their immediate political target of depriving Wentworth, now earl of Strafford, of friendly witnesses during his trial in London during the spring of 1641.

While the impeachment process went nowhere, Bramhall remained under house arrest till the early months of 1642. In the months prior to the rebellion of October 1641 the Irish parliament overturned most of the land settlements made by him in the previous eight years. Once at liberty, Bramhall travelled north to collect his family – who were still resident in Derry – as a first step towards return to England. Following a brief visit to Oxford he returned to Ripon in September 1642 and attached himself to William Cavendish, marquess of Newcastle. Most of Bramhall's
posthumous reputation rests on his published works, of which *Serpent Salve* (1643) was the first. Most of his writing was carried out on the Continent, to which he went with Newcastle, landing at Hamburg on 8 July 1644. Most of the next few years up to 1648 were spent at Brussels, where he offered Church of England services for merchants and exiles. He had already known James Butler (qv), marquess of Ormond, in Ireland, but they became a good deal closer during the late 1640s when Bramhall returned to Ireland for the space of a year. Correspondence shows him active in Kilkenny, Galway, and Limerick. On 9 March 1650 he was appointed procurator general and commissioner to take a royal portion of prizes and booty captured after the peace of January 1649. He also enjoyed Clanricarde’s protection for performance of the Book of Common Prayer services. This may well have affronted catholic sensibilities, causing his departure from the country in March 1650 ahead of his patron Ormond. He narrowly avoided capture by two parliamentary vessels in the Shannon estuary.

On 26 May 1650 he administered communion to Charles II at Breda prior to the latter’s departure for Scotland. During the 1650s he maintained his close working relationship with Ormond and acted as a royal prize commissioner. He spent this period moving about the Low Countries and even travelled to Spain on unspecified business in 1652. He wrote seven books between 1649 and 1658, of which the most famous has been his *A vindication of true liberty from antecedent and extrinsical necessity* (1655). This was the outcome of a sparring match with Thomas Hobbes. He also returned in his *Answer to M. de la Millitière* (1653) to his earlier interest in apostolic succession and the independence of the English church from Rome. By the middle of the 1650s this was more than a purely academic matter since war and exile were gradually, and to his mind alarmingly, depleting the episcopal bench. When the royal court moved to Brussels in 1659, Bramhall followed on and then crossed back into England in or about May 1660 at the restoration of the monarchy.

**Restoration; archbishop of Armagh; death** As early as June 1660 there were rumours that as a leading ‘sufferer’ he would be granted York. Instead on 1 August 1660 he was nominated as archbishop of Armagh. On 27 January 1661 he presided over a mass consecration of two archbishops and ten bishops in St Patrick’s cathedral, Dublin. This triumphant showcase summed up many aspects of his career and beliefs. A sermon by Jeremy Taylor (qv) extolled episcopacy as the natural counterpart to monarchy. The choice of incumbents had been made by Bramhall in conjunction with Ormond. The reins of the established church in Ireland appeared to be firmly in his grasp. On 8 May 1661 he was elected speaker of the Irish house of lords and all records of his impeachment were expunged from the roll. On 13 July convocation voted a solemn thanksgiving of his services to the church. Just as exile caused him to return to his earlier scholarly interests, restoration caused him to revert to his earlier concern with church temporalities. He managed a bill for union and division of parishes in 1662 but proved unable to engineer a system of uniform tithing and leasing. His efforts to secure remission of the clerical taxations
of first fruits and twentieth parts, as a part of the act of settlement for Ireland, were unsuccessful.

There was also the tricky matter of those ministers who had been ordained by presbyteries. Bramhall insisted on a legalistic offer to ministers who wished to accept the reestablishment which rested on the Church of Ireland's status as the national church. Despite claims that he had learnt moderation in exile his scheme was, in reality, a form of conditional reordination. This is further corroborated by his support of the coercive policies used by Jeremy Taylor in Down and Connor, and by George Wilde (1610–65) in Derry. By 1663 Bramhall's health was failing due to at least two strokes, and so he made his will on 3 January. He bequeathed his estates in Meath, Tyrone, and Dublin to his son Sir Thomas Bramhall. His final fatal stroke came on 23 June 1663 while attending the court of claims in a dispute between himself and Sir Audley Mervyn (qv), who had railed against him in the Irish parliament in 1640–41. He died about 3 a.m. on 25 June 1663, not having regained consciousness. He was buried in Christ Church cathedral.

His funeral took place on 16 July 1663. In his sermon Jeremy Taylor compared him to Richard Hooker, John Jewel, and Lancelot Andrewes, thereby initiating a process which turned Bramhall from an early Stuart cleric into an anglican father. This theme of judicious moderation was further pursued by a short biography which prefaced a large edition of Bramhall's works published at Dublin 1676. The edition, by John Vesey (qv), divides his writings into three parts – discourses 'against Romanists', 'Sectaries', and 'against Mr Hobbs'. This was the content reproduced in the influential nineteenth-century Library of Anglo-catholic theology. In the preface A. W. Haddan, the editor, disparaged his prose style. T. S. Eliot later rebutted this attack in his examination of Bramhall as a link between the generation of Lancelot Andrewes and that of Jeremy Taylor. This has always been Bramhall's remembrance, whether in theology, philosophy, or ecclesiastical politics – as a chief supporting actor in dramas dominated by other figures.

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California, Hastings papers: HA 14037–80; 15153–73, 15948–60; Sheffield City Libraries, Strafford papers, vols vi-vii; State Papers, Ireland, PRO/NAI, SP63/254–60, 270–77, 304–7; J. Vesey, Athanasius Hibernicus or the life of the most reverend father in God, John lord primate of Armagh (1676); E. Berwick, The Rawdon papers (1819); J. Bramhall, The works of the most reverend father in God, John Bramhall, ed. A. W. Haddan (1842–5); E. P. Shirley (ed.), Papers relating to the Church of Ireland, 1631–9 (1874); W. Ball-Wright, A great Yorkshire divine of the 17th century (1899); W. E. Collins, 'John Bramhall', W. E. Collins (ed.), Typical English churchmen from Parker to Maurice (1902), 81–119; W. J. Sparrow Simpson, Archbishop Bramhall (1927); Alan Ford, James Ussher: theology, history and politics in early modern Ireland and England