Gaine, Hugh

by Linde Lunney

Gaine, Hugh (1726–1807), printer and newspaper editor in New York, was born in Portglenone, Co. Antrim, the son of Hugh Gaine, possibly a merchant. There was at least one other son, who also emigrated. The family was Church of Ireland, although in a 1766 religious census family members registered as both dissenters and anglicans. The Gaines were clearly prosperous: on 17 December 1740, the father paid £100 for his son's apprenticeship to James Magee and Samuel Wilson, who were in partnership as printers in Belfast. When the partnership was dissolved in 1744, the apprenticeship ended a year early, but Gaine emigrated to New York and became a journeyman printer with James Parker.

From 1752 Gaine had his own printing business, the Bible and Crown, and was increasingly successful. He moved twice to larger premises, printing several almanacs annually and other books, as well as blank forms, and selling all kinds of goods: stationery, cloth, tobacco, razors and even Irish butter and patent medicines. In August 1752 he published a newspaper, the *New-York Mercury* (from 1768 the *New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*), which at first contained mainly advertisements and anodyne local news items, as well as foreign and shipping intelligence. A row in 1753 with prominent presbyterians in the town, over his refusal to print a letter on the anglican influence over plans for King's College (latterly, Columbia University), was Gaine's first experience of controversy, as both sides subsequently published defences of their views.

Even in this early phase, Gaine's claimed impartiality was motivated more by concern for his business than by any strongly held ideals about the freedom of the press. In general, Gaine saw events from an anglican and establishment viewpoint, but he came to an agreement with the presbyterians and published their material for several years, even though some of it was of a whiggish and even radical cast. In 1768 he became official printer for the colony of New York, and from 1769 to 1775 for both the colony and city of New York, making him still less likely to risk offending the authorities. His printing of large and complex volumes of the votes and legislation passed by the New York assembly more or less fully occupied his workshop during 1762–4 and 1774.

For a time Gaine made common cause with colonial whigs and radicals, particularly (like many other printers) in opposing the notorious stamp act of 1765, which threatened his business interests by applying a tax on paper used for printing legal documents, newspapers and books. In 1768 his newspaper criticised British military reprisals against rioting Bostonians, and as late as 1773 he printed public announcements of the radical Sons of Liberty. By that date, however, the merchant's instinctive fear of the mob, along with the anglican's respect for the crown's authority,

were more important in forming his attitudes. When the taxes, except for the tax on tea, were repealed, the *New-York Gazette* called in 1773 for an end to protests. As demonstrations and rioting spread through the colonies, Gaine reported them selectively, leading some within the emergent patriot party to accuse him of failing to support their cause.

In September 1776, when invasion of the city by the British army was imminent, Gaine fled with some printing equipment to Newark, New Jersey. Matters looked bleak that autumn for the continental army and its supporters, however, and Gaine seems to have decided to make his peace with the British authorities, returning to his New York office in November 1776.

As a result of Gaine's divided loyalties, the colonial authorities did not trust him, and an English-born rival was made king's printer. On the other side, former allies now identifying as patriots regarded him as a 'trimmer' or even a traitor. Gaine was fortunate that his ambivalence had no lasting serious consequences; though privately he seems to have held loyalist views throughout, his overt allegiance to the crown disappeared after the ending of British rule. He took care to limit political news in the *Gazette*, and from 1783, after thirty-one years, discontinued the publication. The word 'Crown' was dropped from the company name after 1780. Gaine's newspapers, annual *Universal register*, public statements, and journals (available for several years around 1770) are important sources of information on the course of the revolution and its aftermath, and important examples of the complexities of attitudes in such epochs. Not all Ulster-born emigrants were on the patriot side; not everyone kept a straight course through the events of rebellion and war.

Gaine's business acumen, personal qualities and reputation for honesty preserved his wealth and his various enterprises through the stormy times following the revolution. He continued to print books until 1800, and was still one of New York's most important booksellers in 1802. In 1792 he printed a catalogue of his stock, over 500 items, an impressively representative list of contemporary works. He was appointed to print the laws and statutes of the city of New York in 1784. Despite the huge output of books, almanacs and newspapers, Gaine's work as a printer was generally regarded as competent rather than ground-breaking by contemporaries. Among his more innovative ventures was the printing for Sir William Johnson (qv) of an edition of the Book of Common Prayer in the Mohawk language (1769). The printing of Bibles, prayer books and other religious material formed an important part of Gaine's business; he was a vestryman in Trinity Church, where Charles Inglis (qv) was assistant rector.

Gaine was also involved in many other businesses. He and two partners (Dutch loyalists) established a paper mill in 1773 on at Hempstead Harbor, Long Island, and afterwards sold paper of all sorts in his shop in Hanover Square. He owned other property in New York and developed his holdings as the town expanded northwards after the revolution, on occasion being involved in paving streets. He built a large

country residence on the King's Bridge Road, and was one of the twenty-eight speculators who in 1770 purchased 28,000 acres of land in Albany county, along the Susquehanna river; the estate was known as the Wallace Land Patent after two of the main partners, the brothers Hugh (d. 1788) and Alexander (d. 1800) Wallace, wealthy Waterford-born merchants and uncompromising loyalists, who returned to Ireland after the revolution.

In public life Gaine played a significant but not showy role; he was a freemason and in 1754 a founding member of New York Society Library. When this was revived in 1788, he was a trustee. He was also vice-president of the New York Hospital, and in 1802 was instrumental in forming a trade association of American booksellers, along with Mathew Carey (qv) of Philadelphia. Gaine was its first president. He was so well known in New York, and so well regarded, that he was frequently asked to witness legal documents and to act as executor in wills. It is in this regard that his name appears in the letters of William Drennan (qv) and his sister Martha McTier (qv). For years Drennan and McTier were involved in efforts to profit from the will of Hamilton Young (d. 1799), their cousin and one of Gaine's partners in the Wallace Land Patent. The will was said to be in Gaine's possession, but Alexander Wallace, a distant relative of Young's, claimed to be the beneficiary by another will. Discussion of the complicated legal wranglings occupied many pages of the Drennan–McTier correspondence.

Gaine married (24 October 1759) Sarah Robbins. They had two daughters and a son before Sarah died in 1765. Gaine married secondly (5 September 1769) Cornelia Wallace (née van Dam), of a well-known Dutch family. Her grandfather was Rip van Dam, who had briefly been governor of New York (1731–2), and her first husband was John Wallace, possibly a brother or other relative of the Waterford Wallaces, Gaine's business partners. Hugh and Cornelia had two daughters. In 1791 the household included five slaves.

Hugh Gaine's son died before him, but when Hugh himself died, on 25 April 1807, he was able to leave a large fortune to his widow and daughters, and had more or less outlived his reputation as a turncoat. If it were not for an amusing and even affectionate poem, 'Hugh Gaine's life' (1783), by the noted poet of the revolution, Philip Freneau, partisan historians would have had fewer witty quotations with which to try to blacken Gaine's name.

Hugh Gaine papers, New York Public Library, digital collections, digitalcollections.nypl.org; Paul Leicester Ford (ed.), *The journals of Hugh Gaine, printer* (1902), full text available on archive.org; Alfred Lawrence Lorenz, *Hugh Gaine: a colonial printer-editor's odyssey to loyalism* (1972); Timothy M. Barnes, *Loyalist newspapers of the American revolution, 1763–1783: a bibliography* (1974);

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