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Blacks in the Gordon Riots - I

Lead: During the American Revolution, an attempt to increase the civil liberties of English Roman Catholics provoked a storm of protest. For five days in summer of 1780 the City of London was convulsed by the Gordon Riots.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Roman Catholics in post-Reformation England suffered near intolerable discrimination. Associated in the English mind with the hostile foreign policy of Catholic Spain and France, Roman Catholics were

thought to constitute a fifth column of traitors. The Black Legend asserted that Catholic spies and Catholic subversives were lurking behind every tree. The truth of the matter was that by 1580 under the deft manipulation of Queen Elizabeth I, the tiny minority of Catholics remaining in England were largely domesticated. They were mostly content to worship in private and endured in relative silence the periodic bursts of anti-catholic sentiment and only occasional enforcement of recusancy laws under which those who refused to attend Church of England services had to pay a fine.

Generations passed before

something was done to rectify this intolerance. Relief came in 1778 when England was embroiled in a war with her North American colonies and things were not going well. Recruits were need to swell the ranks fighting the Americans

That year, Sir George Saville successfully introduced the Catholic Relief Act. Among other things it permitted Catholics to serve in the army without taking an oath of loyalty to the Church of England. It was a simple act of civil decency, hardly any relief it all, but it whipped up a frenzy of xenophobia and bigotry. Lord George Gordon, an eccentric and passionate fanatic, organized the Protestant Association.

It conducted national demonstrations and led a petition drive urging repeal of the Catholic Relief Bill. Next time: Blacks in the Gordon Riots.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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