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CHURCH, STATE AND SOCIETY, 1760–1850

WILLIAM GIBSON

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St. Martin's Press

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First published in Great Britain 1994 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-333-58757-7

ISBN 978-1-349-23204-8 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-23204-8

First published in the United States of America 1994 by
Scholarly and Reference Division,
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, INC.,
175 Fifth Avenue,
New York, N.Y. 10010

ISBN 978-0-312-10363-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Gibson, William.

Church, state and society : 1760-1850 / William Gibson.

p. cm. — (British history in perspective)

Includes bibliographical references

ISBN 978-0-312-10363-7

1. Church of England—History—18th century. 2. Church of England—History—19th century. 3. Church and state—England—History—18th century. 4. Church and state—England—History—19th century. 5. England—Church history—18th century. 6. England—Church history—19th century. 7. Great Britain—History—18th century. 8. Great Britain—History—19th century. I. Title.

II. Series.

BX5088.G53 1994

261.7—dc20

93-28945

CIP

For my family and friends

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PREFACE

The aim of this book is to provide the undergraduate with an accessible examination of the principal themes and issues in the history of religion and society in the period. The years covered by this book were perhaps the most turbulent in the development of religion in British history. It should be borne in mind that this was perhaps the last period in British history in which popular piety was a reality rather than a goal. The British State in the early nineteenth century was still a strongly Christian one; Victorian Britain relied on the churches as instruments of social control. These factors raise questions about the pattern of religious practice and activity which this book seeks to address.

Although this book examines issues and events that stretch from North America to continental Europe, it is predominantly a work of English history. Its principal subjects are the relationships between the Church of England and the State, society, Nonconformity and Dissent. It is not intended that this book duplicate the perspective or material already admirably covered by writers like Ward or Gilbert in their detailed examinations of Nonconformity. Rather, this book attempts to explore the common heritage, social context and political issues that the Established Church shared with Nonconformity.

I should like to record my thanks to the many people who have helped me with the research and production of this book. In particular I would like to thank Jeremy Black for inviting me to contribute this volume, and for his support and advice during the writing. Vanessa Graham, my publishing editor, has provided me with guidance and reassurance. I owe a particular debt to those people who read and commented on earlier drafts of this book:

Preface

William Price, my former tutor and supervisor, commented with characteristic thoroughness and generosity, as did Jeremy Black and Eileen Gibson. Their combined criticisms have preserved me from grosser errors than this book yet retains.

There are numerous other acknowledgements I should make, to librarians, archivists, scholars and colleagues. But my principal debt of gratitude is to those people, family and friends, whose sense of humour and forbearance has supported me.

WILLIAM GIBSON