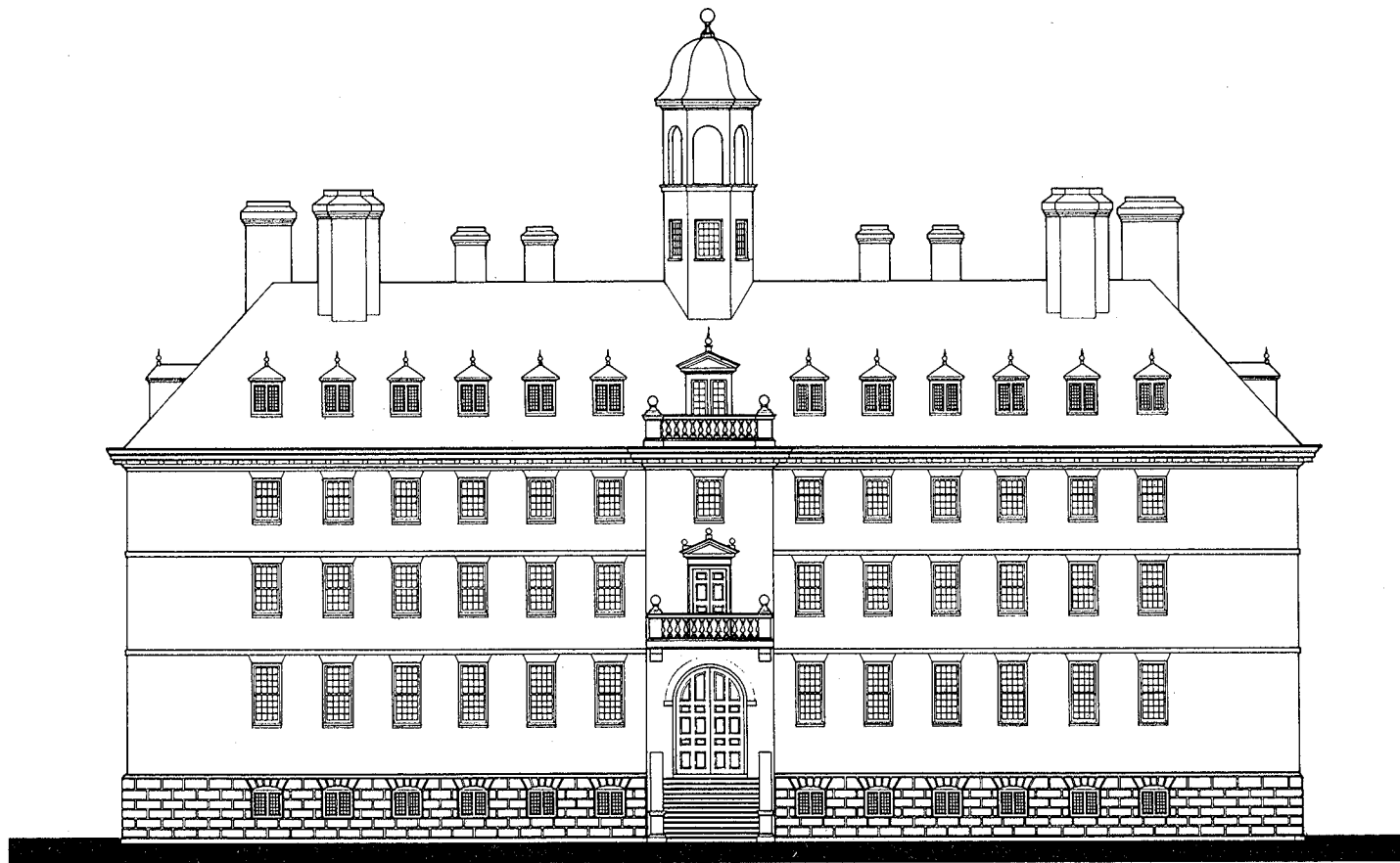


“SO GOOD A DESIGN”

*The Colonial Campus of the College of William and Mary:
Its History, Background, and Legacy*



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Its History, Background, and Legacy*

JAMES D. KORNWOLF

The College of William and Mary
Joseph and Margaret Muscarelle Museum of Art
Williamsburg, Virginia
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Foreword

The identity of the architect who designed the first College building at William and Mary and, indeed, the appearance of that original design and the actual form the building took before it was ravaged by fire in 1705, are questions that have occupied and intrigued scholars of American architecture for many decades. Restored in 1928–31 to its post-1705 appearance and known as the “Wren Building” to thousands of townspeople and William and Mary alumni, the first College structure and its possible connections to Christopher Wren have been the subject of endless casual conjecture and scholarly speculation.

Pending the discovery of a Rosetta Stone in the form of original drawings, plans or other documents, the precise original design and execution of the “Wren Building” will remain obscured by the smoke of the 1705 fire and will, no doubt, continue to provide the subject of much lively debate.

In a study unprecedented in its scope and perspective, James D. Kornwolf examines the early architecture of the College of William and Mary against the background of contemporary developments in Dutch and English architecture as well as in the larger context of the political, social and cultural milieu of the Glorious Revolution. Professor Kornwolf then looks forward to the influence of the design of the college’s origi-

nal building on subsequent developments in American, and particularly collegiate, architecture. While not resolving, once and for all, the Wren controversy, we believe this effort offers valuable insight into the origins of the first College building and its significance and proper place in the course of architectural history.

It is especially appropriate, in this year of the tercentenary celebration of the accession of William III and Mary II to the throne of England, that we present this exhaustive study of the design of their College in the colonies.

We are grateful to the many institutions and individuals whose generous contributions of time and resources have made this catalog and the accompanying exhibition possible. I would like to recognize, in particular, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, without whose unstinting efforts on our behalf this volume could not have been realized. For their invaluable cooperation and assistance, we are also indebted to scholars in numerous American, Dutch and English libraries and museums, all of whom are listed in the author’s acknowledgements.

Special recognition must be made to the staff of the Muscarelle Museum of Art, particularly registrar Louise Lambert Kale and research assistant Dwight Shurko, for their hard work and commitment to the success of this project. This publication could not have been produced with-

out the assistance of Joy Weatherley who skillfully edited the manuscript and saw it through to completion. Geary & Flynn Design, Inc., provided valuable technical advice and support in the design and production of the catalog.

The enormous enthusiasm, energy and dedication of the author, a professor in William and Mary's Department of Fine Arts, have resulted in a collaboration between faculty and Museum of which the College can be proud.

Finally we are indebted to the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency, and the Dutch American West India Company Foundation, Inc. for their very generous support of this catalog and exhibition.

MARK M. JOHNSON
Director
Muscarelle Museum of Art

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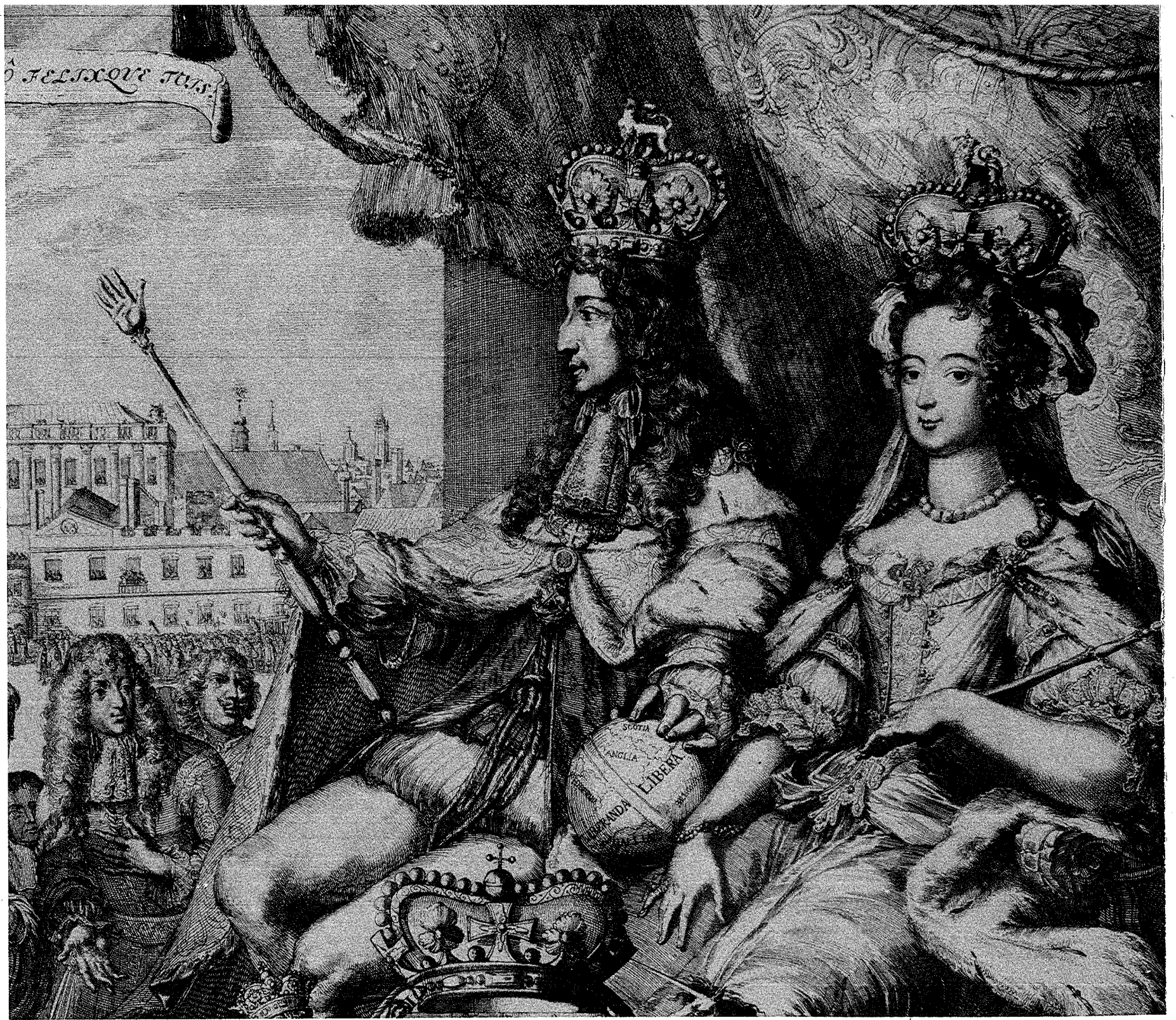
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FELIXQUE TUIS

SCOTIA
ANGLIA
LIBERIA
IMPERANDA

I. Events Leading to the Founding of the College, 1688–1693

The founding, design, and construction of the College of William and Mary in the period 1690–1700 provide the earliest decisive evidence in the United States of a new attitude toward education and architecture that emerged as a direct consequence of the ideals of England's Glorious Revolution of 1688.¹ Because the design for Williamsburg (1699) and the ensuing construction of its major public buildings were inspired by the example set by the College, they, too, may be seen as further developing architectural manifestations of the new artistic, political, and social climate engendered by this upheaval.² The appointment of Francis Nicholson as lieutenant governor of Virginia in 1689 and of the Reverend James Blair as commissary of the bishop of London for the Church of England in Virginia in the same year stemmed directly from the Glorious Revolution. Nicholson's appointment four years later to the governorship of Maryland and his subsequent appointment in 1698 as governor of Virginia should also be seen as consequences of the Revolution.³

The founding of the College owed much to the efforts of Nicholson and Blair. The granting of its charter on February 8, 1693, was due to their success in winning support from William III and Mary II, from leading bishops of the Anglican church—Gilbert Burnet, bishop of Salisbury, Henry Compton, bishop of London, Edward Stillingfleet, bishop of Worcester, and John Tillotson, archbishop of Canterbury—and,

before the decade was out, from the philosopher John Locke. Definite objectives in founding the College were the strengthening of the Anglican church in the colonies and the education of enlightened leaders. Perhaps as a gesture intended to insure its stability, Blair was named president for life in the charter.

The project for a college in Virginia, which began as early as 1619,⁴ is known to have been characterized as being "so good a design" on at least three occasions in 1690 and 1691 by those most involved with its creation. Furthermore, as late as 1723 when Gilbert Burnet's *History of His Own Time* was published, he recalled that Mary had been "so well pleased with the design" that Tillotson had referred to as "our College." When, on July 25, 1690, Nicholson spoke of the project for a college as "so good a design," he was the first to do so. Blair reported to Nicholson on December 16, 1691, that, during his audience with William and Mary on the preceding November 12, the king had concurred and had stated that he, too, was "glad that the Colony is upon so good a design."⁵ It is clear that William, as well as Mary, Nicholson, Blair, and Burnet, referred not to an architectural design but to the overall merits of the concept of the proposed college, and it will be seen that William's support for the College owed much to Mary. Their intense involvement at the time with Christopher Wren in architectural projects and with George London in landscape design at Hampton Court and

Detail, figure 3



Fig. 1. Studio of Godfrey Kneller, *Portrait of King William III of England*, oil on canvas, Joseph and Margaret Muscarelle Museum of Art, College of William and Mary.

Kensington Palace has engendered a major proposition of this study: the king and queen not only supported “the design” that produced the College’s charter and initial endowments, but they also saw that the College was provided with “the design” for its first building as well as one for its gardens.

It is difficult to imagine that the College, Williamsburg, or nascent American artistic, social, and political ideals could have developed in the manner in which they did had the Glorious Revolution not occurred. Many reasons can be cited as possible causes for the upheaval that brought William of Orange and Mary Stuart, eldest of James II’s two daughters, to the English throne in 1689 (figures 1–2). Certainly, James’s support for Roman Catholicism and his efforts to extend toleration to Roman Catholics on two occasions in April 1687 and in April 1688 provoked opposition from leading Anglican clergy. However, it was James’s unwise and arbitrary dispensing with the law in his efforts to grant toleration to groups other than Anglicans that provoked the most intense opposition. The subsequent imprisonment of William Sancroft, then archbishop of Canterbury, and six Anglican bishops for refusing to read James’s second edict extending toleration to Catholics and Protestant dissenters brought his reign to the point of crisis. Seven leading Protestant noblemen then appealed to William to come to England at the head of an armed force to be used against James if necessary. William landed with his troops early in November 1688 and, by the middle of December, with minimal opposition, had caused James to flee the country, thereby vacating the throne.⁶

Clearly, James’s impractical religious policy and his seemingly arbitrary dispensing with parliamentary law worked to bring about his downfall. William’s intervention and James’s removal represented an effort to reestablish the

important constitutional principle of putting the law above the king and Parliament above the monarch’s court. The power base now began a gradual shift from palace and ruler to party and subject. James II’s tendencies toward absolute rule had been brought to a close. The precedent set by the Glorious Revolution paved the way, when it was believed that ample need existed, for American patriots to assert their rights and address their grievances against George III in 1776.⁷

The coronation of William and Mary took place on April 11, 1689 (figure 3). Their reign heralded significant political changes, many of which were attempts to curb the power of the monarch with a view to preventing a future “revolution.” One significant development was the restriction on financing for the monarchy. Whereas in the past the monarch had usually been granted a life pension of funds, monies were now awarded by Parliament on an annual basis. Another check and balance was parliamentary insistence that the monarch not maintain a standing army, which might ignore parliamentary commands. In Parliament itself, the spirit of more democratic government was expressed by the emergence of the two-party system, initially manifest with the more liberal Whigs and more conservative Tories. The exclusive right of the monarch to dominate the courts was also modified in order to create an independent judiciary. Implicit in this budding “constitutional” monarchy was a tripartite system of government—legislative, judicial, and executive, a system that became explicit exactly a century later with the ratification of the Constitution of the United States.⁸

Religious and educational reforms were as intrinsic to the Glorious Revolution as were those in politics. The appointment of Nicholson and Blair to posts in Virginia are as expressive of these reforms as was the founding of the Col-

lege. Since the period of the Civil War (1642–1648) various attempts to establish a workable relationship between the Church of England and other Christian groups had been unsuccessful. The Act of Toleration, instituted by William and Mary in 1689, was a relatively conservative compromise which, while still excluding Roman Catholics, extended toleration to Protestant dissenters.⁹ This act must be seen as a prelude to more sweeping radical attitudes about religious freedom first emerging in the English colonies at the time of the Glorious Revolution—William Penn’s Charter of Privileges is an important example. After the American Revolution nearly all states legislated a complete separation of church and state; no country had previously legislated religion out of government so effectively and so thoroughly.

John Locke’s opposition to James II’s belief in absolute monarchy was strong enough to cause him to go into exile in the Netherlands from 1683 to 1689, returning to England only after the Glorious Revolution (figure 4). While in the Netherlands, Locke wrote several tracts that postulated the concept of the state as an empirical social contract between equals. For Locke, inherent natural rights were of deeper significance and greater profundity than any notion of divine right. While greatly modifying or rejecting medieval Christian concepts of “divine right” government, Locke did not divorce religion from politics nor did he reject religion itself. His views on education, as well as on religion and politics, also help to explain why England, about 1695, accepted the concept of “freedom of the press.”¹⁰

Locke’s enlightened attitude about the need for education at the time the College was chartered makes him a parent of it, but Blair’s difficulties with Edmund Andros, governor of Virginia in the period 1693–1698, engendered Locke’s direct involvement with the College and

the matter of government in Virginia. Blair’s “political strength was a product of the Glorious Revolution,”¹¹ and his Whig alliance with Locke strengthened Locke’s hand against William Blathwayt in democratizing the Lords of Trade, transforming it into the Board of Trade in 1696. The reorganization is usually viewed as a shift of emphasis from prerogative and economic regulation to one based upon law and property rights. This, in turn, strengthened Blair’s hand against Andros. Blair counted Andros as chief among the “enemies” of the College, and Nicholson, as its staunch supporter, provided him with the means to return to London in the spring of 1697 in order to muster further support for the College and for Andros’s removal as governor.

In September of the same year, Locke prompted Blair to write “Some of the Cheif Greivances of the present Constitution of Virginia with an Essay towards the Remedies thereof.” This essay was published in 1724 as *The Present State of Virginia and the College*.¹² On January 20, 1698, Blair wrote Locke and stated that he hoped “that God, who made you such an eminent instrument of detecting the Constitution and Government of Virginia, will likewise furnish you with health and opportunities to redress the Errors and abuses of it.” Successful in his move to remove Andros and in seeing the College’s other principal supporter, Nicholson, appointed governor in the same year, Locke, learning of the College’s near completion, wrote Blair on October 16, 1699: “I hope the Colledge grows and flourishes under your care.”¹³

In Locke, England produced no greater spokesman for the human rights at stake in the Glorious Revolution, and most certainly none at the time of it. His influence on eighteenth-century philosophers who embody the Enlightenment was considerable. Exposed to the ideas of these philosophers while a student at the



Fig. 2 Studio of Godfrey Kneller, *Portrait of Queen Mary II of England*, oil on canvas, Joseph and Margaret Muscarelle Museum of Art, College of William and Mary.

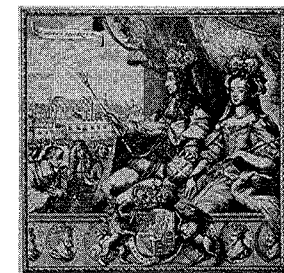


Fig. 3. Romeyn de Hooghe, *The Coronation of William III and Mary II*, engraving, reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

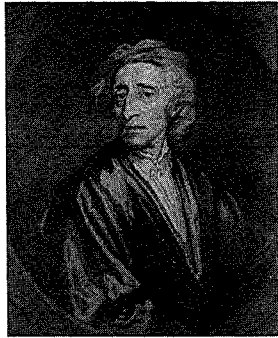


Fig. 4. Godfrey Kneller, *Portrait of John Locke*, oil on canvas, c.1704, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

College in 1760–1762, Thomas Jefferson developed a political theory that derives directly from Locke. However, while Locke rejected the concept of a monarchy that was absolute, he accepted one that was constitutional. Jefferson's full-bodied development of "natural" as opposed to "divine" right theory of government, while owing much to Locke, went beyond him. Jefferson should be credited with helping to convince fellow Americans that monarchy, and consequently aristocracy, should be abolished. If the College had educated no other colonial thinker and leader but Jefferson, Locke's hope that the College would flourish and grow would have been fulfilled. The conclusion of this essay will show that the nature of Jefferson's view of art, as well as that of politics, took characteristic form at the College and in Williamsburg. It will also be shown that by 1732 most of Williamsburg's public buildings and squares—College, Capitol, Gaol, Governor's Palace, Bruton Parish Church, Magazine, Market Square, Playhouse, the Braferton, President's house, and Palace Green (see Appendix I)—stood in styles and on sites that reflected the artistic and political ideas of the Glorious Revolution, ideas that forecasted those of the American Revolution.

This budding interest in natural right theory of government helps to explain the growing passion for nature itself, for developing calculated, but increasingly natural, gardens and landscapes. The Baroque preference for space rather than mass can be clearly seen at Versailles, where this colossal palace is still diminished by its seemingly infinite formal gardens. Early in the eighteenth century, fierce political and cultural rivalry between the Netherlands and England on the one hand, and absolutist France, on the other, found the formal garden identified with French absolutism, the Picturesque *jardin anglais*, with English constitutional liberties.¹⁴ As early as 1685, William Temple, who had spent

considerable time in the Dutch republic, praised the more natural, irregular, and informal Chinese gardens in his essay, *Upon the Gardens of Epicurus*.¹⁵ While the Dutch taste in formal gardens is considered to have reached its apogee with William and Mary in the gardens of Kensington Palace, the painting illustrated in figure 5 shows their later Picturesque state. However, the earlier formal Dutch style of Kensington's gardens can be readily perceived in the clipped evergreens of the College's gardens as shown in the Bodleian Plate (c.1740) (figure 21). The beginning of interest in the Picturesque nonetheless dates to William and Mary's reign. By 1713 Joseph Addison and Alexander Pope had articulated analogies between the Picturesque aesthetic and democratic ethic that were echoed by Thomas Jefferson and John Adams in their 1782 tour of English gardens and continued to be drawn upon well into the nineteenth century.¹⁶



Blair's mission to London in 1691 was successful because he had the support of the most important bishops of the Church of England. Gilbert Burnet, bishop of Salisbury, was probably the most vocal and had given Blair his first opportunity in the Church in London in 1682 (figures 6–7). Henry Compton, bishop of London since 1675, had sent Blair to Virginia in 1685 and had made him his first commissary there in 1689 (figure 8). Edward Stillingfleet, made dean of St. Paul's in 1677 and later bishop of Worcester, introduced Blair in 1691 to the new archbishop of Canterbury, John Tillotson. Tillotson died in 1694, and had Mary had her way, Stillingfleet, rather than John Tenison, would have succeeded him as archbishop. No Englishman held a position so close to the king in the first crucial years as Tillotson, for after

serving as dean of Canterbury Cathedral from 1672 to 1689, he served as dean of St. Paul's and clerk of the King's Closet from 1689 until his elevation to the archbishopric in 1691. Because Compton was ill, Tillotson and Stillingfleet obtained Blair's initial audience with William and Mary on November 12, 1691.¹⁷

Driven, like Blair, from his native Scotland because of religious uncertainties, Gilbert Burnet was renowned for his sermons, which were often sharply worded against the religious policies of Charles II and James II. These forced him into exile in the Netherlands from 1685 to 1688. Burnet was William's chaplain during the crossing to England in 1688 and delivered the sermon at William and Mary's coronation. Late in life he wrote a copious six-volume history, which contains one of the most important references to the College made by those involved with its founding. The two principal reasons Burnet gave for founding the College were that it would be, for the queen, "a means of improving her own people," "a common nursery" of learning for all colonists, and that it would "propagate the gospel to the natives."¹⁸

The bishop of London was designated chancellor of the College in the charter, a position first held by Henry Compton. Educated at Oxford and Cambridge, Compton had served in the military after the Restoration and had traveled widely. He knew Wren, joined him during his French sojourn in 1665, and was among



those who read orations at the dedication of Wren's Sheldonian Theatre at Oxford. Compton schooled Mary in the Anglican faith, helped strengthen the Anglican church abroad, and assisted Huguenot and other refugees fleeing religious persecution. He took strongly to gardening, and Fulham Palace (the official residence of the bishop of London) was well known for its exotic plants from the American colonies and elsewhere. For example, on February 4, 1699, Nicholson wrote Compton about a "Collection of plants" he had apparently sent for "yr Lords[hi]ps paradise at Fulham."¹⁹

Burnet made clear that the "enlightened"

Fig. 5. John Buckler, *South-east View of Kensington Palace*, Christopher Wren, architect, begun 1689, 1826, reproduced by courtesy of the British Museum.



Fig. 6. J. Hargreaves, *Portrait of The Reverend James Blair*, oil on canvas, Joseph and Margaret Muscarelle Museum of Art, College of William and Mary.

principles behind the Glorious Revolution were one reason for founding the College and that putting the Church of England on stronger footing at home and abroad was another. William's preoccupation with undermining French power and with protecting both the Netherlands and England resulted in his spending at least half the year abroad. Mary, therefore, controlled domestic affairs, certainly those pertaining to the Church in which she had special interest. If Blair, with the support of Nicholson and the House of Burgesses, led the renewed quest for a college in Virginia, Mary must be given primary credit for it becoming a reality. Burnet made that perfectly clear when he wrote that "no objection against it could move her" and that "she espoused the matter with a particular zeal, so the king did readily concur with her in it."²⁰ Without Mary's devotion to the project, without her patience and perseverance in having it presented to William and in winning his assent, and without the encouragement of her bishops, it is difficult to see how else there would have been sufficient support. When Burnet wrote that "all possible objections were made to the project," he may well have had in mind a member of the Treasury Board, Edward Seymour, who reportedly said with regard to the religious mission of the proposed college, "Souls! . . . Damn your Souls! Make tobacco."²¹

When Francis Nicholson arrived as lieutenant governor of Virginia in May 1690, he not only

brought Compton's letter appointing Blair commissary, but also appears to have concentrated his full attention on founding a college, for, by July 25, 1690, he had appointed a commission to look into the matter and told the Governor's Council: "It is requisite and convenient for Carrying on the good Designe of having a free School & Colledge in this Governmt . . . that persons be appointed . . . to take the Subscriptions of Such as are willing to Contribute towards soe good a designe." This was not the first time that Nicholson showed his interest in education. As a member of the Governor's Council of New England in 1687 he had written English clergy about the need "both for the schools, Coleidge, and Ministry" there.²² The Governor's Council and House of Burgesses in Virginia debated the matter of a college over a six-day period beginning May 18, 1691. On May 22, a detailed set of instructions was issued to Blair, perhaps drafted by Nicholson, for pursuing in England the founding of the College.²³

Blair was to "go straight to England," present his credentials to the bishop of London, "deliver our supplication to their M[ajesties . . . and endeavour to procure from them a charter," "perusing [the] charters of similar institutions." He was also to "beg" that it be incorporated in the name of the monarchs and that its site be approved by them. The instructions did not charge him with obtaining funds from the crown, but only to "collect donations" for the

College after obtaining its charter. It may well be that the instructions assumed the granting of a charter necessarily implied not only funding from the crown, which was granted, but a design as well. Blair's instructions also addressed the organization of the College, and he was further charged with finding "a good schoolmaster, usher, and writing master." What donations he obtained were to "be lodged as seems best to the Bishop of London, Lord Howard of Effingham, Mr. Jeffrie Jeffries and Mr. Micaiah Perry and yourself." The accounts were also to be made available to "the Bishops of Salisbury and St. Asaph," and to Arthur North, John Cary, and Francis Leigh. Finally, Blair was charged "in matters wherein you have no instructions" to use his "own judgment." No mention whatever was made about the building or the funds it would require to house the proposed college.²⁴ However, the charge that he study "existing charters of similar institutions" implies that he probably visited not only Oxford and Cambridge, but also Aberdeen and Edinburgh, where he took his own degrees.²⁵ Naturally, his attention would also have been drawn to the architecture of these universities.

In June, Blair sailed for England with Jeffries, who was charged with helping Blair on his mission. Both men were allocated £200 for expenses, and Jeffries was authorized "another £200 as necessary."²⁶ Blair arrived in London on September 1, 1691, the day after Compton, at

Mary's request, had consecrated the chapel in the newly opened Royal Hospital at Chelsea, designed by Wren. In part because William was in the Netherlands until late October, Blair encountered immediate delays. He wrote Nicholson on December 3:

When I first came to London . . . there were many things concurred to hinder my sudden presenting of the address about the College, for Mr. Jeffreys was in Wales, & did not come to Town to present the address upon their majesties accession to the crown; the Bishop of London thought it not so proper to present an address about business; then the King was in Flanders; the Bishop of St. Asaph at his diocese in Wales, and before Mr. Jeffreys came to Town the Bishop of London was taken very sick, so that for a month's time he was not able to stir abroad.²⁷

Nicholson was also informed that Compton was "under a great cloud and mighty unwilling to meddle in any court business," possibly because he had been passed over as archbishop of Canterbury. With regard to the College, Blair told Nicholson that Mary, whom he described as "a very great encourager of all works of charity," "seemed to like it extraordinarily, [and] promised to assist in recommending it to the King, but ordered that the address should not be presented till the King came himself." Burnet had also advised the commissary that "the King had left the matters of the church wholly in the Queen's hands." Blair considered further that

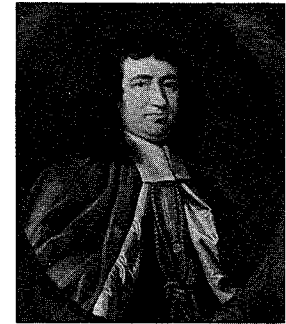


Fig. 7. John Riley (after), *Portrait of Gilbert Burnet, Bishop of Salisbury*, oil on canvas, National Portrait Gallery, London.

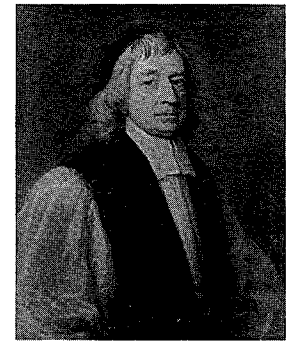


Fig. 8. Godfrey Kneller, *Portrait of Henry Compton, Bishop of London*, oil on canvas, National Portrait Gallery, London.

Stillingfleet, then bishop of Worcester, was “much in favor with the Queen,” and finally he reported to Nicholson that Burnet had told him “to have patience . . . for the King at his first coming would be full of his Parliament business but if I would leave it to him he would tell me when was the proper time to deliver the address & would before hand prepare his majesty.”²⁸

On November 12, 1691, Commissary Blair was presented to William and Mary at court in Whitehall by Lord Howard of Effingham, governor of Virginia, and Tillotson, archbishop of Canterbury. Compton was not present, for, according to Blair, he was “that day taken with a fit of the stone.” Tillotson had already mentioned the proposal to the king and told Blair “that he had never [seen] the King take anything better than he did the very first proposal of our college.” Blair further reported to Nicholson his conversation with William. “Please, your Majesty here is a Humble supplication from the Government of Virginia for your Majesty’s charter to erect a free school & college for the education of their youth.’ . . . ‘Sir,’ [replied William] ‘I am glad that the Colony is upon so good a design & I will promote it to the best of my power.’” Blair ended his letter suggesting what would happen next:

The King gave it to the principal Secretary, my Lord Nottingham, at whose office within two days I had it again . . . the Parliament sits so close that it is a hard matter to find anybody at leasure . . . yet I persuaded the Bishop of London . . . to come for half an hour to his chamber at Whitehall, where I presented and read him a Memorial I had prepared for his Maj[es]ties use, and the Archbishop and he are to wait an opportunity to speak to the King about it. Everyone thinks it is in so good a way that it cannot well miscarry. I make it my whole business to wait upon it, and if I hear further before the ships go to your Honor [you] may

*expect another word upon it.*²⁹

After initial approval of the College by William and Mary, the matter now needed review by various councils. William Blathwayt, as auditor general for their Majesties’ Plantations, needed to assess what impact its creation would have on Virginia’s resources.³⁰ Similarly, the Lords of the Treasury, and Tillotson and Compton, needed to make recommendations to the Privy Council, which would make a final report to the crown. No monies would be forthcoming, however, for another ten months, and Blair would have to wait until September 1, 1692, for funding. He wrote Nicholson on February 27, 1692, that Tillotson was

*for five months frozen up at Lambeth [Palace] and unable to get to Whitehall. Since that time my patience has been sufficiently exercised . . . for our College business (as indeed all business whatsoever) has bin at a stand, the King being so wholly taken up with the thoughts of the war and the transportation of the household and the Army, that for a long time he allowed not the Lords of the Treasury to lay any other business before him until all affairs of that kind were dispatched.*³¹

Blair appears to have paid meticulous attention to his instructions. He wrote some “three quires” of letters in September and October 1691, one of which was sent to the Reverend James Kirkwood in Scotland on November 21, 1691. Shortly after the death of the English physicist Robert Boyle on December 31, 1691, Blair, through Burnet, a friend of Boyle and one of his executors, found out about the £5,400 Boyle had left for “pious and charitable uses,” some of which Blair would later obtain as a major endowment for the College. Early in 1692 he obtained a pledge of £300 from three pirates, Edward Davies, Lionel Delawafer, and John Hinson, against whom Virginia had a claim, which was presumably dropped with this settle-