



English and Irish Nonconformist Records

Michelle Dennis looks at records left by those who rejected the Established Church of England

WHAT IS A NONCONFORMIST OR DISSENTING ANCESTOR? The term is used to describe those who rejected the practices of the Established Church of England (Anglicans). This included Methodists (Wesleyan and Primitive), Presbyterians, Puritans, Baptists, Quakers (Friends or Strangers), Unitarians, Independents and Congregationalists. The term usually refers to protestants, but also may include Catholics and Jews.



Exiled nonconformists landing in America. (Public Domain)

The theological belief in the priesthood of all believers, i.e., that a person may communicate directly with God without the need of a clergyman to intercede, distinguished all dissenters from practising Anglicans. At the time, this was seen as blasphemy by the Anglican Church. Dissenters also did not conform to its customs, regulations, or sacraments.

Modern religious dissent in England stems from the Restoration of King Charles II in 1660, and from those who, by dissenting from the 1662 Act of Uniformity, were labeled nonconformists or dissenters. The Act of Uniformity insisted that all men in holy orders, every minister, teacher, lecturer, or university fellow, must submit to Anglican author-

ity and to the bishops, as if God appointed them. If such ministers were unable or unwilling to conform, they were ejected from their livings (religious and government appointments).

Although most clergy conformed to the Church of England's strict rules, many refused to do so. Almost 1,000 (a sixth of the total) lost their employment, and approximately 2,000 clergymen and teachers suffered in England and Wales between 1660 and 1662, creating a permanent split in the religious life of Britain. Often the nonconformists had powerful support from outside the church, including major English industrialists like Josiah Wedgwood.

Acts of Parliament that affected our ancestors

- Act of Uniformity 1662 – ejecting nonconformists requiring them to conform to the Anglican Common Book of Prayer and the 39 articles (statements of belief contained therein).
- The Conventicle Act of 1664 – forbidding the meeting of more than 5 people for unauthorized worship.