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Some Studies in English Religious History
A Review Article

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Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of Wilberforce. By FORD K. BROWN. London: Cambridge University Press (Toronto: Macmillan), 1961. Pp. 569. $10.50.

Servant of Slaves: A Biographical Novel of John Newton. By GRACE IRWIN. Toronto: McLelland and Stewart Limited, 1961. Pp. 437. $5.00.

Religious Toleration in England, 1787–1833. BY URSULA HENRIQUES. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961. Pp. vii, 294. $5.00.

Godliness and Good Learning: Four Studies on a Victorian Ideal. By DAVID NEWSOME. LONDON: John Murray, (Toronto: Macmillan), 1961. Pp. xii, 291. $6.00.

FATHERS OF THE VICTORIANS is a large and impressive book dealing with a large and impressive topic, the Evangelical Reformation in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In his introduction the author sets up a sharp contrast between the Methodists (with some of their Evangelical friends) and the later Evangelicals whose movement gained impetus in the 1790's. The Methodist Revival, he maintains, touched only one stratum of society, the lower class, and made little impact on "people who counted," the wealthy, the industrialists, the aristocracy. It had no foothold in parliament and it was distrusted and strongly opposed by both the clergy and the laity of the Established Church. The rigid Calvinist theology of Whitefield and some early Evangelicals was repellent to the English ruling class. By 1790 Whitefield has been dead for over twenty years and Wesley for six years. Although many souls had been converted in the Revival, and vital, experimental religion was to be found in a few parishes, yet the nation's life had not been deeply affected. To this extent the Revival had failed.

"Fat Bulls of Bashan," the strikingly titled first chapter of Mr. Brown's book, is a blistering indictment of English society at the end of the eighteenth century. Lax sexual morality and coarseness were unchallenged. Extremes of wealth and poverty were appalling. Crime flourished despite a savage penal code. The Church had a secure position, yet it was spiritually torpid and had hardly been touched by the earlier revival.

The Moses who appeared to lead Church and nation out of the house of bondage was William Wilberforce. He was neither Dissenter nor Methodist but a Churchman, one moreover who had been converted from "nominal" to "vital" Christianity. He was a close friend of the Prime

Minister, William Pitt the Younger. From a secure position in the House of Commons he waged unceasing war against slavery. From the same point of vantage he introduced despised Evangelical clergy to places of importance in the Church. A man of wealth, acceptable in high society, he professed his faith in a sphere which Methodism could not reach. He possessed tact, winning manners, and a political and worldly sagacity which did not needlessly antagonize those whom he sought to enrol in a crusade for the religious regeneration of his native land. So effectively did he do his work that long before his death "men and women of good will over England and over the world saw in this frail dedicated little man the spiritual leader of his country and the world's foremost moral citizen" (p. 268).

Mr. Brown's book is not another biography of Wilberforce, although the great reformer is its most prominent character. All outstanding Evangelicals have a place in the story, in particular the members of the Clapham group. As the subtitle would lead one to expect, many Victorian prototypes put in an appearance. Hannah More's contribution to the Evangelical Reformation is evaluated with sympathy and critical insight. A large chapter is devoted to the famous controversy with the curate of Blagdon, Mr. Bere, who withstood her efforts to promote schools. This was an Evangelical–High Church battle which resulted in loss of face and grace on both sides. A further chapter, featuring Isaac Milner and Charles Simeon, describes the struggle to establish a branch of the British and Foreign Bible Society at Cambridge. It contains diverting glimpses of King George's nephew and son-in-law, the Duke of Gloucester, known to the irreverent as "Silly Billy." Still another chapter, "Ten Thousand Compassions," prints a list of seventy-eight persons, the majority of them Evangelicals, each of whom subscribed to more than fifteen benevolent and philanthropic societies. Wilberforce contributed to sixty-nine such institutions and was vice-president of twenty-nine!

Mr. Brown plainly admires the Fathers of the Victorians although his admiration is not uncritical. At times it is difficult to tell whether he writes in jest or earnest. He knows that Evangelicals were violently opposed by many contemporaries and concedes that a measure of this opposition was merited. He describes acutely the restricted aims of the group. Like their bitter High Church adversaries they were strongly conservative, although they gained an undeserved reputation for being radicals. They had never heard of social ethics and had no desire to alter the structure of society. Their great campaign was waged against infidelity and irreligion. All their activity had a religious motivation, understood in Evangelical terms. Yet from this platform, vulnerable to the slings and arrows of orthodox Churchmen as well as atheists and radicals of all kinds, they were instrumental in changing the tone of English society in a generation, an achievement hardly to be paralleled in English religious history.

The last chapter in Mr. Brown's volume contains a strong critique of Wilberforce's biography written by his sons Robert and Samuel, and of

Mrs. More's memoirs written by William Roberts. In both cases, he maintains, the achievements and characters of their subjects have been deliberately obscured. Wilberforce's sons had not followed in their father's religious footsteps and were concerned to play down his Evangelical affiliations. But Mr. Brown gives indications that Wilberforce himself had moved to a more central ecclesiastical position and hints that he might not have objected to the filial editing of his papers. As for Mrs. More's editorial biographer, however, the author writes indignantly that Roberts "will have to answer at the day of judgment" for reducing this vigorous lady's words and deeds "to his level for our good to edification" (p. 532).

Mr. Brown's book would have gained by being shortened. He does not indicate clearly why the children of the Evangelical giants of the early part of the century deserted the viewpoint of their fathers. He makes a useful distinction between the Revival and the Reformation, but the contrast is perhaps too marked; one wonders if Wilberforce and Mrs. More would have accomplished so much if the Wesleys and others had not preceded them. He does scant justice to the Church of the eighteenth century; neither the S.P.G. nor the S.P.C.K. appear in the index. But *Fathers of the Victorians* will absorb the reader's attention with its recital of a famous campaign for national righteousness waged not only with carnal weapons of propaganda, money, and organization, but also with faith and prayer and deep devotion.

John Newton's name, needless to say, occurs many times in the volume just reviewed. He was a hearer of Whitefield, a strong Calvinist, a protégé of Lord Dartmouth and John Thornton, an adviser and friend of Wilberforce and Hannah More. The turbulent early years of his life, contrasted with his later eminence as curate and vicar of Olney, and rector of St. Mary Woolnoth in London, continue to fascinate biographers. Two studies have appeared not long since, *An Ancient Mariner* by Bernard Martin (1950; revised 1960), and a perceptive sketch by Margaret Cropper in *Sparks Among the Stubble* (1955). Now we have a biographical novel, *Servant of Slaves,* by Grace Irwin, Head of the Classics Department of Humberside Collegiate Institute, Toronto.

Novels of this type are admittedly not to everyone's liking. It is probable that readers of this *Journal* who wish to study the life of John Newton will not resort to such a literary genre. Nevertheless *Servant of Slaves* is a well-written book based on a serious study of its subject and a wide range of reading. The author claims with truth that "Newton's own writing or recorded conversation appear on every page. The reader may well be assured that if he finds anything unbelievable of adventure or coincidence, anything excessive, either sensual or spiritual, anything improbable in emotion or devotion, that part of the book is probably factual, even understated" (p. 8). As a companion to the writings of Newton himself or to one of the older biographies it can be well recommended. The novel uses the love story of John Newton and Mary Catlett as a theme, but the

hero throughout is that well-known and well-loved erstwhile African slaver who was, as his epitaph proclaims, "by the Rich Mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Preserved, Restored, Pardoned, and Appointed to Preach the Faith he had long laboured to destroy."

While Revival and Reformation were in full career, another campaign was being fought, the story of which is outlined in Ursula Henriques' *Religious Toleration in England, 1787–1833*. The author writes: "The book is a study of the political struggles over the repeal of laws restricting or penalizing religious minorities in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the opinions and ideas expressed in the controversies surrounding these struggles" (p. v).

The volume begins with a succinct yet comprehensive survey of legislation relating to religion from 1559 to 1787. It then outlines, in the first place, elements in the development of the theory of toleration drawn from writings of John Milton and John Locke; and in the second place, rational dissenting elements contributed by Joseph Priestley, Richard Price, and Robert Robinson. A learned discourse follows on Church–state relationships in late eighteenth-century England. Attempts to abolish compulsory subscription to the Thirty-nine Articles are described, and an account is given of similar attempts to secure repeal of the Corporation Act of 1661 and the Test Act of 1673. The first statute was aimed at excluding Dissenters from municipal corporations, and the second at preventing them from holding civil or military office under the Crown. Opposed to repeal were those who felt that admission of Dissenters to office would upset the equilibrium of Church and state. Promoters of repeal were for the most part in favour of separation of the two great institutions.

Political and religious ideas of Edmund Burke are then discussed. In 1779–80 Burke was prepared to support repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. His change of mind was brought about by excesses of the French Revolution, as the reader of his famous *Reflections will easily recall.* The repeal campaign was lost and was not taken up again until after the Napoleonic Wars. Burke strongly supported the Established Church against Dissenting attacks, but he was willing to get rid of the Sacramental Test as a qualification for office, and he favoured Catholic Emancipation.

This latter movement is next taken up, and the controversy, long and intense and mainly concerned with Ireland, is well described. Opposed to emancipation were Irish Protestant Ascendancy families, supporters in the main of the Established Church of Ireland, as well as many English churchmen who held strong anti-papal prejudices. Pitt's tolerant Irish policy won the backing of William Wilberforce. Many Whigs favoured emancipation in later years, as also did Sydney Smith, Thomas Arnold, and the Benthamite Radicals. Emancipation was finally granted by the Act of 1829, not entirely because of persuasion by those who argued for religious toleration but also because the Irish were prepared to fight for it.

An attempt to emancipate the Jews was made at the time of the repeal

of the Test laws. A Jewish relief bill was lost in Parliament in 1830 as were further bills in 1833 and 1834. Not until 1858 did Jewish emancipation take place. At least some Evangelicals were behind this movement to extend religious freedom. Wilberforce, for example, a contributor to the Philo-Judean Society, favoured greater toleration. To Evangelicals the Jewish people were held to be "a religious group having a special, providential relation with a dominant Christianity" (p. 205).

Deists and infidels were regarded as dangerous politically; hence they met with harsh treatment under the law. Prosecutions for blasphemous libel were frequent. In this activity Evangelicals co-operated with the Crown ministers although Wilberforce represented the broader side of the Church movement and the Milners the narrower side. Evangelicals were not intolerant of Dissenters as such, but only of those who were hostile to religion or attached to a subversive faith. They felt that no one should be allowed to propagate infidelity, because such beliefs were the result of a careless and irreligious life. Infidels such as Godwin and Shelley (at least in the poet's early days) rejected supernatural religion and did not believe that morality was derived from faith. Rationalists such as Jeremy Bentham held that religion should be subject to full and free discussion, for only in this way could truth be discovered. The author leaves it an open question whether infidel ideas, if given full expression, would have really tolerated the existence of the Christian Church, but she praises those who pleaded for fairness in judgment and who justified freedom of discussion. In the period under study the blasphemous libel laws were not abrogated, although government prosecutions were dropped. Avowed infidels and atheists had to wait for a later generation before they gained political rights.

Professor Henriques' book is not easy reading. It is, however, a lucid and disciplined discussion of problems which in one form or another every age must attempt to solve. The reader will close the volume with a greater understanding of arguments for and against religious toleration, and will learn to view them not abstractly, but as they appeared in the social, political, and religious context of the day.

The religious seriousness which accompanied the Evangelical Revival affected many aspects of society and many individuals who would have rejected its theology. Evangelicalism "set the pattern of Victorian family life and ethical training, perhaps the most important formative power behind the eminence of the eminent Victorians"—so writes David Newsome in *Godliness and Good Learning* (pp. 7f.). Out of such homes came many leaders of a great era "stamped with an unmistakable mintmark: a combination of intellectual toughness, moral earnestness and deep spiritual conviction" (p. 25).

The new spirit affected the public schools, institutions which called for reform in the early part of the century. The ideal which inspired the new breed of headmaster was that expressed in the title of the book, a close alliance of education and religion.

As an example of one who translated this ideal into action the author describes the work of Thomas Arnold at Rugby. It is a perceptive, wide-ranging account, taking up such topics as discipline, syllabus, teaching methods, master-pupil relationships, and chapel sermons. A second study describes the career of James Prince Lee, an almost forgotten man who was an assistant master under Arnold and who later became headmaster of King Edward's School, Birmingham. "In the nine and a half years of his headmastership, Lee was rewarded by phenomenal academic success and a devotion from his pupils which can scarcely have a parallel" (p. 117). Evidence of the first is the succession of brilliant scholars which he sent to Cambridge, including B. F. Westcott, J. B. Lightfoot, and E. W. Benson. Lee excelled as a classical scholar and teacher and succeeded in communicating to his pupils an enthusiasm for the Greek Testament. While at Birmingham he carried on a bitter controversy, and as Bishop of Manchester he earned much resentment, particularly from those who did not sympathize with his churchmanship. But as an incomparable teacher his influence was kept alive in his pupils, who learned from him to reverence godliness and good learning.

The third study of Mr. Newsome's book is that of Martin White Benson, who died at the age of seventeen when his father was bishop of Truro. In this moving account, based on original sources, the author endeavours "to reconstruct the life of a schoolboy in the Victorian age, in particular a schoolboy in whom the ideal of godliness and good learning found a willing and eager recipient" (p. 26). Martin was trained to be a model pupil who, at the age of ten, was sent to Winchester School. By the last year of his life he had attained such remarkable intellectual maturity that he corresponded with his father almost as with an equal. When the youth caught tubercular meningitis and died, the light of his father's life went out for a time. In a poignant poem to his son's memory the Bishop wrote:

> Martin I know; and when he went home
> He carried my heart from me.

In his sketch of Thomas Arnold the author states that F. W. Farrar's book for boys, *Eric: or Little by Little,* "is a truer reflection of Arnold's ideals than Thomas Hughes's masterpiece," *Tom Brown's Schooldays.* But he goes on to say that "by about 1870 Tom Brown had become a pattern for schoolboys, and Arnold's teaching had given way to a new code in which manliness, animal spirits and progress at games figured as the attributes most to be admired in a boy" (p. 37). This "new code" is dealt with in the last chapter "Finale: Godliness and Manliness." Of this school Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes were representatives. The "manliness" which tended to replace "good learning" as a schoolboy ideal was more in line with imperialistic notions in the later Victorian era. On another educational level it was also a reaction to some of the peculiarities which adherents to older ecclesiastical ways found in the younger "puseyite" clergy. "God-

liness" too, in the sense in which it was understood in the earlier part of the century, gave way, among university men, to an "honest doubt," particularly in view of the Church's slowness to accommodate its scriptural beliefs to scientific discovery.

The author concludes his studies by pointing out that the worst educational feature of the ideal of godliness and good learning "was the tendency to make boys into men too soon; the worst feature of the other . . . the opposite error of failing to make boys into men at all." But, he concludes, "both ideals were grand conceptions. . . . Both enunciated a code of living which was unselfish, active, honourable, useful and good" (p. 238).

These studies have a marked literary quality and are full of interest. They illuminate the life of the English school and home in the Victorian era and can be guaranteed to please those whose childhood fancy drew nourishment from *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and the *Boys' Own Paper!*