

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

## MEMORIES OF CANON CHRISTOPHER

BY THE REV. W. H. GRIFFITH THOMAS, D.D.

NOTE.—*The inception of these recollections was due to the thought that the various stories told from time to time by Canon Christopher ought to be preserved, because they were too good to be lost. Then came the further idea of compiling a Memoir which would be at once of interest to the Canon's friends and also of service to the cause of Evangelical Churchmanship for which he lived. No one would claim for Canon Christopher any outstanding greatness of personality or wide influence in the world at large, but both the singular goodness of his character and the fact of his representative position in Oxford seemed worthy of being embodied in a brief account. This then is the twofold purpose: to give some idea of the man's beautiful personality and some conception of the Evangelical and Protestant Churchmanship which he embodied and furthered during his long life. As everything else has been made subsidiary to this double object, it has been necessary to rule out many details of Canon Christopher's life and testimonies to him which his friends would naturally and rightly like to see recorded. These had to be sacrificed to wider interests. As I do not possess any experience of writing Biography, I cannot tell how far I may have succeeded in accomplishing my desire; but at least I can say I have tried to depict the personal life and strenuous work of one whose Curate it was my privilege to be, and for whose memory I have the tenderest and most thankful affection.*

## I. EARLY LIFE.

ALFRED MILLARD WILLIAM CHRISTOPHER, familiarly known in later years as Canon Christopher, was born on August 20th, 1820, being the twelfth of fourteen children, twelve of whom grew up, though only four lived to old age.

His father's only sister, the wife of the late Mr. Millard, of Downend, Gloucestershire, had no children, and soon after the birth of her nephew, Leonard (afterwards Major-General Christopher), she carried off the eighteen months old Alfred to her own home and brought him up till he was nearly fourteen years of age. During that time he did not go to any boarding-school, and only for the last six months attended a day school. Mr. Millard was fond of mathematics, and it may be mentioned here that the Millard Lectureship and Scholarship at Trinity College, Oxford, were founded by his legacy to the College for the promotion of Mathematical Science. The uncle's taste for mathematics may be said to have influenced the whole course of his nephew's life. At eleven years

of age he was greatly interested to find that he could understand Euclid, and very soon Euclid and Algebra became a delight to him. One of his morning pleasures was to race his uncle in doing algebraical problems. The result was that when he went to school for the first time, at the age of fourteen, he gradually worked his way to the top of the school in mathematics, and a Cambridge examiner recommended that he should be sent to Cambridge, whither he subsequently went.

It will be remembered by the friends of the late Canon how fond he was of tracing the guiding hand of God in his own and other people's lives. Indeed, this was one of his strongest characteristics, and exemplified his remarkable faith in the loving Fatherhood of God. The very words and tones of strong conviction of the dear old Saint of God come back, as he recounted how the Cambridge mathematical course led to his being appointed Principal of the Martinière, Calcutta, in 1844, and that from this had come, step by step, all his other appointments, including his long tenure of St. Aldate's, Oxford. We shall see that this was really the case. He delighted to trace all his positions in life in the Providence of God to what he quaintly described as his Uncle Millard's partiality for mathematics.

Young Christopher's childhood was a singular one. He was absolutely without companions, and had no play simply because there was no one to play with him. This led to his living very much upon his imagination. The most interesting reading to a young boy is the history of wars and battles, and everything Alfred Christopher could lay hold of upon this subject was a real delight to him. The histories of Hume and Smollett were among his treasures, and a history of the American War of Independence was another favourite. A book which greatly fed his desire to be a soldier was "The Life of John Ship," who, as an orphan in a parish workhouse, entered the army as a drummer boy, became a sergeant and led four "Forlorn Hopes" at the first and unsuccessful siege of Bhurtpore. Ship received a commission for his bravery and became a Lieutenant. The boy found this true narrative written by Ship himself of enthralling interest and imagined himself engaged in all kinds of military situations with hairbreadth escapes. Doubtless heredity played no little part in this fascination, for stories of fighting, in both Army and Navy, were strongly represented in his ancestry. His family

continued this fine martial succession. His younger son (Alfred Seton) became Captain of the Seaforth Highlanders.

When he was thirteen and a half he went as a day scholar for a few months to a small school in Downend and worked away with interest at Cæsar's "Gallic War," a subject which suited his "war-like" tastes. After this short experience of day-school life, he then went to the home of his parents at Chiswick, and from thence was sent in July, 1834, to a boarding-school. This was a large private school of more than sixty boys kept by a Mr. John Barton at Hall Place, Bexley, Kent. In due time Christopher's mathematics carried him to the top of this school. A love of cricket acquired at this time led on to his being one of the Cambridge University "Eleven" in 1843. He always said he would never have been in the Cambridge Eleven but for an incident which occurred during his school days at Hall Place. A certain number of the boys were allowed to go to Chislehurst to see a match between the Kent Eleven and All England. Christopher had never before seen a round-arm ball delivered and watched with delight for the first time the formidable round-arm bowling of Alfred Mynn and the splendid batting of Fuller and Pilch.

At this match the Hall Place boys met the pupils of a private school at Blackheath whose master played in some of the All England matches under the assumed name of "Felix." In training his boys, he applied the idea of the catapult for playing well-pitched balls. His machine could not make the ball "break", but the "pitch" was perfect, and his school Eleven were so well trained by him that they habitually beat all the private schools in the neighbourhood. Accordingly, when they challenged the boys of Christopher's school to play a match, it seemed a forlorn hope to think that the latter could beat such a trained eleven. But the Hall Place boys pluckily accepted the challenge and it was arranged that the Blackheath boys should go to Hall Place in three weeks' time. Christopher, thereupon, set to work to practise round-arm bowling. At that time it was not lawful for the elbow to be raised above the shoulder in delivering a ball and it required usually very long practice not to bowl "wide." The eventful day came, and it appeared a foregone conclusion that the trained Eleven would give the Hall Place a thorough beating. But young Christopher began to bowl well, and when he took one wicket, that gave him confidence and he soon

bowled another. Indeed, he took three wickets in three successive balls, and clean bowled seven batsmen in the first innings. The result had better be told by the Canon himself :

It is as true as anything I ever wrote in my life, but it will require unbounded confidence in my truthfulness to believe it, that this redoubtable, trained, scientific Eleven only got one run off the bat in the first innings and the Hall Place boys won the match.

In the return match at Blackheath, however, science and experience asserted their claim, and Hall Place was beaten.

The Canon could only remember one schoolfellow who became eminent. That was Louis Desanges, the well-known artist and portrait painter, who painted a succession of interesting pictures illustrative of the deeds of those who have won the Victoria Cross. Desanges always gained the first place in drawing and Christopher the second.

Another incident of his boyhood connected with his elder sister Isabella may be recorded in his own words :

The second (Isabella) of my seven sisters who all lived to grow up was a living evidence of Christianity to me as a boy and a young man. She devotedly nursed our dear mother night and day during a painful illness, ten years in length, when it seemed as if she was rarely out of our mother's bedroom except to get something for her. And yet when our dear mother "fell asleep," she thought she had not done all she might have done for her. She fell into a state of morbid despair. She was the most holy one of the family, in the eyes of her brothers and sisters, yet she thought she could not be saved. I was her young brother of sixteen years of age who knew but little of the Bible. I had only one qualification for helping her, which was this : I felt certain that if anything could help her, it must be in the Bible, for she would care for no book of less authority. So I began to search the Scriptures. I thought there was a great possibility of finding something that would help to comfort and encourage her in "the Book of the Prophet Isaiah." So I began to read the first chapter of that Book. When I came to the 18th verse, "Come now and let us reason together," saith the Lord, "though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow, though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." I started up and ran upstairs to my dear sister, who was ill in bed as a result of her morbid state. I felt that this was a text suited for a great sinner, which was what my dear sister thought herself to be, though all her family knew her to be a great saint. I repeated this one verse over and over again. My most effective sermon was all text and nothing in addition to it.

In her 95th year I asked her, "What was the text which restored you, through the Spirit Who used it, to peace, health and usefulness?" She repeated Isaiah 1. 18. [She said "That text was thumped into my heart all night as I lay awake." I had really forgotten what the text was, but I think I never can forget my sister's answer to my question.

Through the efforts of this sister, Isabella, Christopher became a pupil with the Rev. Charles James Goodhart, then Incumbent of

St. Mary's Episcopal Chapel, Reading, in after years the Minister of Park Chapel, Chelsea, and Secretary of the London Society for promoting Christianity among the Jews, and later still, the Rector of Wetherden, Suffolk, where he lived to a great age. Mr. Goodhart had graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge, as a Wrangler in 1826 and was also in the Second Class of the Classical Tripos. His ministry was of a deeply spiritual and thoroughly Scriptural character, and though Christopher was with him as a pupil only for the short time of three months, the influence was abiding. Goodhart was the one who impressed him for life in favour of Evangelical principles as at once Scriptural and truly representative of the Church of England.

This conviction of the truth of Mr. Goodhart's sermons does not mean that he was converted by them, but it was impossible not to see the gracious Providence of God in setting before his eyes in his sister Isabella what he often called "a living evidence of the truth of Christianity." He was able to trace all her devotion to their parents, and all her unselfish love to her brothers and sisters to her Christian principles, and this biased the youth strongly in favour of those Evangelical doctrines which he knew were at the root of the holiness of her character and the usefulness of her life. Humanly speaking, he could never have known Mr. Goodhart but for her, and perhaps if he had not come under the influence of that Scriptural teaching, he might not have been so ready, when a freshman, to accept the invitation of another freshman to go with him to the Sunday evening meeting of undergraduates held by Mr. (afterwards Canon) Carus, from whom he received the same teaching which had so impressed him in Mr. Goodhart's sermons and conversation.

Although necessarily anticipating events of many years later, perhaps it may be added here that during Mr. Christopher's first twelve years as Rector of St. Aldate's, Oxford, Mr. Goodhart was a welcome speaker year by year to undergraduates at Mr. Christopher's weekly meetings and also a preacher in St. Aldate's Church. Later on it fell to Canon Christopher's lot to visit his old tutor on his death-bed, and to read the funeral service in Wetherden Church, Suffolk.

W. H. GRIFFITH THOMAS.

*(To be continued.)*