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# Image and Appearance: some Sources for the History of Nineteenth Century Nonconformity (2)

## 5. *The record of Compassionate Concern*

The mediating role of the "Condition of the People Question" in acclimatizing nonconformity to the novel has already been noticed. Turn to the Christmas Appeal number of any of our contemporary religious journals and it will often read like a catalogue of nineteenth century charitable initiatives, and when, of course, one begins to search for the history of these organizations then one comes upon a myriad of others which have either amalgamated or not survived. The strand of evidence here is that of society papers—imagine the Exeter Hall in the month of May, that great succession of annual meetings which concerned itself with so widespread a spectrum of Victorian life. Picture, too, the preparatory committees that took place in the preceding months, the local agents sending in their reports, diligent branch officers—all of them with pen in hand writing about what they saw and what they were doing. Sometimes this strand of evidence becomes more official when the officers of the Christian Societies give evidence before select committees and royal commissions. Insofar as this evidence concerns philanthropic activity it has been interpreted by Dr. K. Heasman in her *Evangelicals in Action*.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Rusling and Mr. Parsons will know well this kind of source as it reveals the interests of our forefathers in countries overseas: but there is here still much evidence to be sifted, evaluated and interpreted.

Out of this tradition also came two documents which are still widely revered for the insights that they give into the nature of Victorian poverty: I refer to *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: an Enquiry into the Conditions of the Abject Poor* (1883) with its dubious authorship. I think it is best to credit it to both Rev. W. C. Preston and Rev. Andrew Mearns who used as part of their evidence facts supplied to them by Pastor Archibald Brown and members of East London Tabernacle.<sup>2</sup>

Seven years later came General Booth's *In Darkest England and The Way Out*, with its plan of hope for 'the submerged tenth':

"If this were the first time that this wail of hopeless misery had sounded on our ears the matter would have been less serious. It is because we have heard it so often that the case is so desperate. The exceeding bitter cry of the disinherited has become to be as familiar in the ears of men as the dull roar of the streets or as

the moaning of the wind through the trees. And so it rises unceasing, year in and year out, and we are too busy or too idle, too indifferent or too selfish, to spare it a thought. Only now and then, on rare occasions, when some clear voice is heard giving more articulate utterance to the miseries of the miserable men, do we pause in the regular routine of our daily duties, and shudder as we realise for one brief moment what life means to the inmates of the Slums. But one of the grimmest social problems of our time should be sternly faced, not with a view to the generation of profitless emotion, but with a view to its solution. . . .

“What a satire it is upon our Christianity and our civilization, that the existence of these colonies of heathens and savages in the heart of our capital should attract so little attention! It is no better than a ghastly mockery—theologians might use a stronger word—to call by the name of One, who came to seek and to save that which was lost, those Churches which in the midst of lost multitudes either sleep in apathy or display a fitful interest in a chasuble. Why all this apparatus of temples and meeting-houses to save men from perdition in a world which is to come, while never a helping hand is stretched out to save them from the inferno of their present life? Is it not time that, forgetting for a moment their wranglings about the infinitely little or infinitely obscure, they should concentrate all their energies on a united effort to break this terrible perpetuity of perdition, and to rescue some at least of those for whom they profess to believe their Founder came to die?”<sup>3</sup>

The book is fascinating not only for its contents but also because of the rift it produced in the Salvation Army. On the one hand Frank Smith who wrote articles for the *War Cry* under the unfamiliar heading of ‘Sociology’ pressed for more social action, whilst on the other were more conservative officers whose views George Railton expressed when he said that he feared that the social scheme was ‘a turning aside from the highest to secondary things’<sup>4</sup>—and in this respect the Salvation Army represents a microcosm of Evangelical Nonconformity: the tension between those who saw the Gospel as exclusively spiritual and those who saw it as inclusively social. And indeed even within this second category there is a wide spectrum of thought and activity: from the ‘expedients’ who saw the need to ply a hungry man with soup in order to secure his ear for the gospel, to the ‘obedients’ who saw social righteousness not as ‘means’ but ‘end’ or at least as part of the total ‘end’ of Christian witness. For them true religion could not be totally other-worldly or spiritual but a sanctification of this world, and who knows but that in the long-run the strategy was with them, for men are remarkably perceptive of the social carrot set for the enticement of their eternal souls.

#### 6. *Public and Denominational Records*

I think it almost impertinent to remind members of this society of Dr. W. T. Whitley’s two volumes of *A Baptist Bibliography*,<sup>5</sup> though

it is now twenty-one years since Dr. Whitley died without completing the third volume. More recently Dr. Payne has shown us the importance of John Rippon's *Baptist Annual Register* (1790-1803), the *Baptist Manuals* (1847-66) and their successors the *Baptist Handbooks* (from 1866) not to mention the Minutes of the Union and the Annual Reports of the Council of the Baptist Union, so many of which are the children of Dr. Payne's own incisive understanding of the life of the church in the modern world.<sup>6</sup> Since 1905, of course, these records need to be supplemented with the records of the Baptist World Alliance, itself a fulfilment of the dream that John Rippon committed to paper when he wrote his first Annual Register. At the same time the records of the Strict Baptists should not be neglected: indeed perhaps, here, the need for work is even greater. Anybody who enters this area will be greatly helped by Mr. Ian Seller's plan of campaign for the writing of a denominational history to be found in the *Strict Baptist Historical Society Bulletin No. 5* for 1966.

On a wider front there are the Minutes of the Protestant Dissenting Deputies deposited in the Library of the City of London at the Guildhall, in sixteen folio volumes, which Bernard Manning so lovingly and reverently studied for his *The Protestant Dissenting Deputies*.<sup>7</sup> The seventeenth volume was destroyed by enemy action in the war and the eighteenth volume must now be 'maturing.' One cannot, I think do better in suggesting the importance of this source than quote Manning's own evaluation of them in a letter he wrote to his publishers: —

"As far as I am aware no one has ever read these Minutes except for severely practical purposes. They appear to be unknown to 19th century historians. Even a writer like Halévy has the most sketchy notions about the Deputies. Yet they are the most important of all the keys to an understanding of the political importance of Dissent in the 18th and 19th centuries, because they record the day-to-day activities of the most active of all the Dissenters. Much has been made of the political activities of the Methodists, of the importance of the Quakers and Unitarians; but the three historic bodies of Dissenters have never taken their natural place in the story. They acted until far into the 19th century mainly through the Dissenting Deputies. The Deputies, as their Minutes shew, were behind nearly all the legislation which is vaguely attributed to the Dissenting Interest and left at that."

After indicating the range of the book, he continues:

"I should like to make it clear that the Minutes are of wider interest than denominational or ecclesiastical. There is no feature of 19th century history in particular which they do not illustrate. They provide a definite example of the way in which public opinion organized and mobilized itself and made itself effective in the Parliamentary government of that age. They shew one form of ecclesiastical opinion modifying general tendencies of legislation. They bring out the peculiar position of the Dissenting

Bodies under the Toleration Act with their privileged status on one side and their lack of ordinary rights on the other. In short they illustrate in detail and at close range some unique features of English political thought and practice.<sup>8</sup>

But in fact in writing the history Manning also incorporated another strand of natural records, the complementary 'Minutes of the General Body of the Three Denominations.'

A more recent account of interdenominational activity is to be found in Dr. Jordan's *Free Church Unity (1896-1941)* which tells at once the story of the National Council of the Evangelical Free Churches and of the Federal Council of the Evangelical Free Churches.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from the education issue, these bodies met for more eirenic purposes than the old Deputies whose whole *raison d'être* had been the rejection of dissent by the social and ecclesiastical establishment. However, so far, except in hospitals and on a few housing estates and more recently with the establishment of a joint chaplaincy at Keele, the Free Church Council Movement has proved something of a *cul-de-sac* in ecumenical developments.

Religious history cannot, however, be written entirely from ecclesiastical sources: the witness of the reports of Royal Commissions and of Parliamentary Select Committees to the humanitarian involvement of nineteenth century religion has already been noted. The description of four further concerns cannot be undertaken without similar resort: I refer to the whole theme of dissenters' grievances, to the concern to defend the protestant faith against increasing Roman demands, to that most tangled and contorted discussion of denominational or non-denominational education, and to the various campaigns to disestablish parts of the Church in Great Britain and Ireland.

The campaign against civil disabilities saw its first success in the Repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828. Thereafter the pressure was for an ending of the Anglican control of the registration of births (1836), deaths (1852, 1880) and marriages (1836), the abolition of Church Rate (1868) and of University Tests (1854, 1871). In all this the heat generated by the Liberation Society must always be seen in the wider context of parliamentary debate.<sup>10</sup> Similarly the protestant conscience of the country makes its impact on parliament in 1829 in the emancipation debates, in 1845 with regard to Maynooth, in 1850 with regard to Papal Aggression, in 1875 with regard to the Public Worship Regulation Act.<sup>11</sup> So also with what perhaps we may now consider the darkest shadow that religious history throws across the nineteenth century scene: the fact that until 1902, the rivalry between Church and Chapel denied Great Britain a national system of education<sup>12</sup> which was both free and compulsory. But perhaps the most theologically significant judgments come from the disestablishment debate with on the one hand the arguments of the Coleridge-Arnold tradition for the continued establishment of the Church of England, even perhaps in some more inclusive form, as the Church of the English nation, and on the other a certain unity between noncon-

formists and some Tractarians who saw only their abhorrence of Erastianism reflected in an Established Church owing authority to a secular Parliament.<sup>13</sup>

7. *Froth, Gossip and responsible comment*

Journalism among the Free Churches has an ancient tradition: Dr. E. Routley describes the Marprelate Tracts as "a series of documents published from a secret and mobile press in 1589-90, which with hilarious impudence attacked the whole Anglican system in general and the bishops in particular, giving in the manner of modern journalism, chapter and verse for every personal attack and flaming out at intervals into paragraphs of furious moral indignation." They represent in fact "pioneering work in journalism ante-dating by a century and a half the vituperative eighteenth century pamphlet."<sup>14</sup> The journalistic tradition is continued through the revered names of Daniel Defoe and the *Athenian Review* (1690 ff.), Toplady's *Gospel Magazine* (1766-84) and Wesley's *Arminian Magazine* (1778 ff.).

By the turn of the century the evangelical press was expanding rapidly. The Religious Tract Society was founded in 1799 and in its turn stimulated the older Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge into renewed vitality and so R. D. Altick is justified in stating the bold claim that "religious literature was everywhere in nineteenth century England."<sup>15</sup> Homes, prisons, schools and in their time railway stations, all witnessed the omnipresence of religious print even before the coming of its secular competitors. Nor in those untravelled and unentertained days, did it all seem so dull as it does now. "Even the researcher" it has been said "occupationally inured to bone-dry reading, soon abandons his foray into the desolate wastes of evangelical print. But what is desert to him was a land flowing with milk and honey to those who were barred from great areas of secular literature."<sup>16</sup> And for sheer volume it cannot be ignored; the same author quotes the following figures prepared by John Francis, publisher of the *Athenaeum*, in 1864 for Edward Baines, M.P. and regarded by the *Publishers' Circular*, one of the two leading trade journals, as accurately representing the situation.

<i>Description:</i>	<i>Number:</i>	<i>Price:</i>	<i>Copies per Month:</i>
<b>MONTHLY PUBLICATIONS:</b>			
Religious ... ..	84	½d.-5d.	1,500,000
Religious Magazines ... ..	22	6d. up	400,000
Temperance ... ..	20	¾d.-3d.	800,000
Useful, educational and entertaining ... ..	19	1d.-6d.	350,000
Magazines and Serials of Higher Class ... ..	54	1s. 0d.-2s. 6d.	250,000
Illustrated Serials ... ..		1s. 0d.-3s. 6d.	300,000

## WEEKLY PUBLICATIONS:

Religious ... ..	15	1d.-1½d.	500,000
Useful educational and enter- taining ... ..	32	1d.-3d.	750,000
Journals containing novels etc.	13	½d.-1d.	1,050,000
Romances exciting wonder and horror ... ..	8	1d.	200,000
Immoral ... ..		1d.	9,000
Free-Thinking ... ..			under 5,000

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Comparable to the secular reviews of the old journalism were the *Eclectic Review* (1805-68), the *Evangelical Magazine* (1793-1904), the *British Quarterly Review* (1845-86) and the *British and Foreign Evangelical Review* (1855-88). All these were solid volumes containing long and often involved review articles of no mean scholarship but little public appeal—the lightest of the four was the *Evangelical Magazine* and that only by reason of its giving fewer columns to reviews and more to reports of religious meetings and obituaries.

The *Eclectic* was the classical expression of orthodox nonconformity, though it also appealed to Evangelical Churchmen like Zachary Macaulay. It has perhaps received only partial judgement from Halévy when he wrote, "Readers of this excellent periodical will look in vain for an article of mystical aspiration or religious meditation. Under cover of making war against clericalism, embodied in the Establishment, it spoke of nothing but free trade, the franchise, and the individual's political rights, and thus, instead of making Radicalism Christian it ended by secularizing Christianity."<sup>18</sup> Selling at 1s. 6d. a month its appeal was mainly to Baptist and Congregationalist ministers and their more affluent laymen. Its maximum circulation was about 3,000 copies per quarter but by 1863 it barely sold half that number and this was after it had been considerably revived by J. B. Paton with the assistance of R. W. Dale. In 1868, under the editorship of J. Paxton Hood, it perished, but with little surprise since the editor for some time had published little more than his own manuscripts.

For thirty years from 1824 the *Evangelical Magazine* was all but the proprietary paper of Dr. John Morison, the Congregational minister of Chelsea, and flourished under his pen. With a circulation of 18-20,000 in 1807<sup>19</sup> it was inaugurated in 1793 by Rev. John Eyre, who like his successor Rev. George Burder, combined the editorship of the magazine with the secretaryship of the London Missionary Society. When the Baptists formed their own Union in 1812 both Society and Magazine became predominantly Congregationalist, though from 1818 it had to compete (successfully) with the more strictly denominational *Congregational Magazine* which continued until 1845 (and as the *Biblical Review* until 1850), being hard-hit at that time by the quality of the *British Quarterly Review* and the vehemence of John Campbell's magazines, all of which canvassed an

Independent clientele. But the *Congregational Magazine* under John Blackburn had served the denomination well; when, he was replaced in 1845 by a commission of theological professors its fate was sealed. But the *Congregational Magazine* and the *Evangelical*, together with the *Eclectic*, had played an important part in preparing for the association of Independent Churches in the Congregational Union, by providing a generous platform for the pleas of its advocates. Even the mighty Dr. Campbell was not unwilling to pay the *Evangelical* 'our excellent contemporary' a compliment, when he suggested that it fulfilled a supplementary role to his own papers: "Those of milder mood will repose in the refreshing shade of the *Evangelical*, and those of sterner mould may gather animation in the more fervent atmosphere of the *Witness*. The elder journal will more particularly administer the Peace, the younger the War department of the Church of Christ."<sup>20</sup>

The *British Quarterly Review*, which latterly took over the position of the *Eclectic*, was begun in 1845 by a group of nonconformists who were at that time dissatisfied with the association of the latter with the noisy dissent of Miall and the Anti-State Church Association and their insistence that voluntary education was the only valid system, though the *British Quarterly Review* itself was never anti-political; indeed, in the hey-day of political dissent it came to represent the thinking of the best minds of dissent upon political issues, as well as on theological scientific and literary matters.

"To twentieth century readers the journal seems intolerably heavy and dull the articles being too long and too weighty for modern taste, but it did work of incalculable value in manifesting to the world nonconformist opinion, and showing that the dissenters were not the Philistines Matthew Arnold and others too easily assumed them to be."<sup>21</sup> Indeed both Matthew Arnold and Newman both complimented Dr. Henry Allon, editor of the Review from 1874 to 1886 on the quality of the journal. Not only so but Allon performed much the same function of keeping Gladstone informed of nonconformist opinion as Robertson Nicholl was to perform for Lloyd George.

But the history of dissenting journalism in the mid-century was not easy. In the first place there is the disruptive ascendancy of Dr. John Campbell, the 'stormy petrel of Victorian Congregationalism.' His view of the old reviews was clear.

"Six shilling Quarterlies belong to the reign which gloried in castled waggons, drawn by twelve horses, and moving at the dignified pace of twelve miles a day; half-crown Monthlies are of a species with the handsome English stage-coach driving at twelve miles an hour—good things, *inside*, for people possessing wealth and leisure; but Cheap Periodicals belong to the age of the Railway! Every man, then, to his taste; Gothic things for Gothic men; but light postage, quick transit cheap Bibles, and Cheap Periodicals for the Millions of England!"<sup>22</sup>

Hence in 1844 he started the *Christian Witness*, a 3d. monthly with a large circulation, in 1846 the *Christian's Penny Magazine and Friend*



of the *People* a penny monthly, and in 1848 a stamped weekly, the *British Banner*. Campbell's magazines were popular but contentious: he attacked the political nonconformity of Miall's *Nonconformist*, and the interdenominationalism of the Evangelical Alliance, whilst he nearly tore the Congregational Union to pieces over the *Rivulet* controversy, and involved not a few Baptists in the argument in the process: Spurgeon's review of the *Rivulet* in the *Christian Cabinet* was in Lynch's view, unlike other criticisms, 'impertinent without being malevolent.'<sup>23</sup>

Heresy—hunting it seems was the best aid to journalism in the mid-century. John Campbell's *British Standard* made capital out of Dr. Davidson's resignation from the Lancashire Independent College in 1857 after he had been charged with infidelity; in 1860 our own journals—the *Baptist Magazine* and the *Freeman*—witnessed a controversy concerning the value of J. Baldwin Brown's *Divine Life in Man*, which the Spurgeon family subsequently saw as an important prelude to the Downgrade Controversy.<sup>24</sup> But by then the character of the journals was again different.

Englishmen alive in the 1880's were constantly being surprised by the novelty of so many things in the world around them: the new imperialism, the new unionism, the new journalism and even the new woman. The distinguishing features of 'the new journalism'<sup>25</sup> have been much debated but nobody, I think, doubts the connection between it and Forster's much abused—by nonconformists at least—Education Act of 1870 which created the schools from which there emerged a new literate class "who had been taught to decipher print without learning much else." It was for them that Harmsworth produced "chatty unintellectual pabulum for uneducated minds," written as Salisbury's hackneyed censure has it, "by office boys for office boys."<sup>26</sup>

The man who above all others interpreted the genius of the new journalism into the religious division was William Robertson Nicholl who was knighted for his services to religious journalism in 1909. His great work was the creation and editing of the *British Weekly* until it became the foremost instrument of nonconformist aspirations in England. Although the paper contained signed articles by many well-known names the selling feature of the first issue (November 1886) was its publication of the results of a new religious census of London which it had initiated, followed in October 1887 with a series on 'Tempted London.'

William Robertson Nicholl and the *British Weekly* seem to me to have had a mediating influence in late Victorian England, thereby doing much to preserve the unity of nonconformity at a time when it could very easily have been atomized. On the left stood James Clarke's *Christian World*, the *Nonconformist and Independent* less robust in harness than either had been on their own, and the *Methodist Times*; and on the right, *The Christian*, "the organ of every one who preaches in a tent," Spurgeon's *Sword and Trowel* and the *Life of Faith*, journal of the Keswick theology. In politics

Robertson Nicholl was pro-Chamberlain and anti-Gladstone: he once wrote "I cannot see how anyone who has studied Gladstone's career can fail to see that he regarded Dissenters with something like loathing."<sup>27</sup> But on the other hand he had little taste for Chamberlain's South African adventures. In the Downgrade Controversy he supported the Baptist Union, but he had always a high respect for Spurgeon. In November 1886 he wrote "It is a great mistake of W. to think he has nothing to learn from Spurgeon. And that attitude makes Spurgeon angry and alienated. We cannot overlook facts and the fact is that the Spurgeonic type of preaching is the only kind that moves the democracy. I know there are very repulsive elements about all that set of people. But I know . . . that they are the salt of the earth. My great desire is to treat them with sympathy and respect and so to be able to teach them by degrees more charitable views. That is not at all difficult for me—I mean the first thing—as my sympathies are and always have been, almost entirely with them. Much as I have learned from W., I think him quite dark on that side."<sup>28</sup>

Or again Nicholl expressed his annoyance with Marcus Dods when shortly after Spurgeon's death in 1892 Dods wrote a paragraph critical of him. Nicholl wrote, "I am sure he was one of those to be the more regarded the more he is known. As to his bigotry—yes, and I had my share of his abuse. But think how slowly the critical light has broken—think what most of us did and said in the days of our darker ignorance—think how incomprehensible it necessarily was to them. As to the weightier matters, he was wiser than the rest: that is, if the New Testament has any serious meaning and I am inclined to think it has."<sup>29</sup>

The essentially Evangelical nature of Nicholl's contribution was attested by Handley Moule, Principal of Ridley Hall and subsequently Bishop of Durham. Of Nicholl's *Return to the Cross* (1897) he wrote "Very specially, I have again and again given thanks for your strong and reasoned witness to exactly that range of truth—the truth of guilt and of Cross-won remission and acceptance—the *nulla propter Christum condemnatio*,—which is now so widely ignored if not rejected—and the absence of which seems always to me to bring a long and dreary *falsetto* into the whole music of theology."<sup>30</sup> He took sides with orthodoxy against A. S. Peake's open-mind, and against A. S. Fairbairn over the "latter-day Unitarianism of some of his pupils." Peake's pupils revealed the same fault:

"Again, I went lately to a meeting of your students in White-chapel and made a little address. I noticed particularly the opening prayer, delivered by a comparatively young minister whose name I do not recollect. It was rather in the George MacDonald style, with some expressions out of *David Elginbrod*, but it was curious to see that he never prayed for the conversion of souls. He made no allusion to the death of Christ or to the work of the Holy Spirit, in fact it was a prayer which

a Unitarian might have offered. You may say that this is a small thing and that we all of us do the same thing at times. Certainly; but one puts one thing along with another. I feel very deeply that if Primitive Methodists lose their evangelistic power they will lose their savour. You cannot in the circumstances make them great scholars or great literary men, whatever you do.

I am also extremely impressed by the heathenish manner in which certain Nonconformist 'Settlements' are carried on. There is, it is true, a certain pretence of Christian teaching, but what is taught is not Christianity. No heart is thrown into it and no interest is taken. On the other hand, people are got through socialism, waxworks, magic lanterns, and the like. But it is not this way that our Churches have lived or can possibly live. Forgive me bothering you with this, but you have a great trust committed to you. The moulding of the Primitive Methodists will be much in your hands, and I want you to think it over. It is not that I am opposed to people getting educated and reading books: far from it. But the value of all that is being enormously exaggerated. I feel I would much rather have the superstitions of the Roman Catholic Church than a great deal that passes for enlightened teaching amongst us. It beats me to think how people can congratulate themselves that a few Roman Catholic priests have turned from their own Church to Sabatier. You would not believe what hosts of letters I get, and do not print, about the kind of thing that is preached in many of our chapels just now, especially by the younger men."<sup>81</sup>

This is serious criticism from the pen of one whose whole career was devoted to stressing the social implications of Evangelical faith. Nowhere is this plea more tellingly made than in a poem by Isabella Mayo which Nicholl published in the *British Weekly* in connection with the following quotation from a daily paper: "Certain manufacturing companies, whose shareholders receive 20 per cent on their capital therein, pay many of their employees at a rate by which they can earn three farthings an hour, or about three shillings for six days of twelve hours' labour."

The poem concerns a child whose miserable East End upbringing leads to an illness which occasions a period of recuperation in a country convalescence home which we must, I think, presume is financed by nonconformist charity. He compares the clean fragrant beauty of the country with his drink-dominated life in a dark East End court. He would like to emigrate but he is not fit enough and so he concludes his discussion with the back-street secularist philosopher 'Long Dick.'

That's why I wish I was ill again, that I might go where the lady sings;

For there's one in special that always comes, and speaks so sweetly of holy things.

She's wife o'the head of the firm that owns the great match factory

near our court—

But always when I begins on her, Long Dick turns grumpy and cuts me short.

Says he, "There's no one knows more than me that we're bad and ugly and coarse and low,

But I'd rather be us," says Dick, "than the gents whose money-making has made us so;

And who live apart in their pleasant homes that have their root in our toil and pain,

And preach of Heaven and God to us whose blood is on all the gold they gain.

Don't let none prate about 'doing good' till they're trying their hardest to just do right;

If there is the God that they talk about, they're viler than we are in his sight,

With their twenty per cent for doing naught, while our women slave for three bob a week—

Let them stop that short ere they take to preach, and I'll be the readiest to hear them speak."

And there comes such a light in Long Dick's blue eyes—but then he was country-bred you see;

You can't expect that sort of a pluck in Londoner chaps brought up like me:

We're either ready to rob and rive, so we drink our liquor and dance our fling—

Or we weakly wish we were always ill, that we might stay where the ladies sing!<sup>82</sup>

#### 8. *Architecture and Artifacts*

It has always seemed to me that one of the great dangers in the writing, teaching and learning of history is to rely too exclusively on literary sources: the danger is, of course, that of getting a two-dimensional view only of that which you study, of over-intellectualizing people and events, to miss the atmosphere essential to an understanding of the past as it really was. So in our literary studies we tend to overlook architecture, ceramics, portraits, broadsheets in the form they first appeared (before they have been taught good manners by uniform academic book print), indeed, a whole range of artifacts linking us directly and most certainly with the past.

The chapter entitled 'Love, Courtship and Marriage' in Spurgeon's illustrated autobiography is headed by a picture of the Crystal Fountain at the Crystal Palace entitled 'Our Trysting Place,' at once an insight into the humanity of the preacher, and into the industrial pride of the Londoners to whom he preached. The autobiography records that as they walked those great glass galleries, "I think we learned many things beside the tenderness of our own hearts towards each other."<sup>83</sup>

Or again in the same volume there are a pair of cartoons produced in 1855 when Spurgeon had taken over the Exeter Hall for preaching

—on the one page is ‘The Slow Coach’ an ancient bespectacled cleric drives a cumbersome coach, plushly and gothically appointed, drawn by the horses ‘church and state,’ whilst on the opposite page is ‘The Fast Train,’ a youthful Spurgeon astride a rocket-like engine, very utilitarian and very mechanical which with full steam up looks highly purposeful.<sup>84</sup>

I am sure that there are still many survivals of Victorian religion which can illuminate our understanding—celebration china,<sup>85</sup> old etchings and commissioned portraits, tombstones and memorials, but above all, of course, we have the record of bricks and mortar.

“Pitch pine pews, green walls, brass, Lombardic and handsomely painted pulpit, lamp brackets, carpeted alleys, stencilled texts and homeliness, it was better than the best house in the circuit . . . These were indeed the thresholds of a better world than this, *the brick and stone expression of individual conversion and acceptance*, not the stilted copying of a religion based on Prayer Books and Missals and idol worship. This was the Liberal vote.”<sup>86</sup>

Indeed Betjeman goes further, suggesting that Victorian dissenting architecture reflected popular tastes in a unique way. It was, he says, a return to “the true architecture of the people”: “Not since medieval days had the people clubbed together to adorn a place of worship and this time it was not a shrine but a preaching house . . . They (these chapels) try to ape nothing. They were anxious not to look like the church, which held them in contempt; nor like a house, for they were places of worship, nor like a theatre, for they were sacred piles.” Not only did they represent “pennies saved which might otherwise have been spent on drink, or profits from tiny shops and lean farms and gardens where farm workers had toiled until sundown,”<sup>87</sup> but also more directly the skills and abilities of the people’s crafts, the mason and the carpenter, the bricklayer and the decorator, wrought-iron worker and installer of incandescent gas.

The changes in architecture are important too. The old eighteenth century meeting houses, breathing something of “the quality of a well scoured farmhouse kitchen,” were built for congregations who were theologically literate: they are confined and familiar. The chapels of the Methodist and Evangelical Revivals, on the other hand, are universal—they were built for “men who had not previously bothered about spiritual matters.”<sup>88</sup> Here was both loss and gain: increasingly the notion of the Church as a fellowship of persons committed to Christ and to one another was replaced in practice by the spectacle of the popular preacher surrounded by a bulging congregation. Nonconformists had been those who listened for the voice of the Holy Spirit in their Church Meetings, now they more often listened to the preacher, and his words might—or might not—convey the voice of the Spirit. Well might a correspondent to the *Patriot* complain that a church of over 1,000 seats was a betrayal of the older Nonconformist concept of the Church: the witness of the architecture is that the concern now was for pulpit audiences not

for church fellowships.

Or again you have that social and liturgical change which takes place when Salem Chapel, Otley (1825) becomes Otley Congregational Church (1899),<sup>89</sup> restrained classicism giving place to aspiring Gothic complete with tower. This is, I think, in part the expression of an inferiority complex: as against the bold honesty of the older *chapels*, the newer *churches* witness wealthy dissent aping out-dated Anglican practice. As Professor Horton Davies has it: "The Puritan emphasis on truth was being replaced by tact, the Puritan fear of idolatry by the Victorian Nonconformist fear of not being respectable."<sup>40</sup>

Contrast this new sophistication with the earthy vulgarity of early nineteenth century dissent. Dickens has the atmosphere well:

"It was a little Bethel, a Bethel of the smallest dimensions, with a small number of small pews, and a small pulpit in which a small gentleman (by trade a shoemaker and by calling a Divine) was delivering in a by no means small voice, a by no means small sermon."<sup>41</sup>

Put over against that in stark contrast the Gothic liturgies of a highly respectable aspiring metropolitan congregation at the end of the century. Here is an amazing change: as it affected the Congregationalists, Professor Horton Davies comments: "It must be acknowledged that the journey from 'bare barn' to the King's Weigh House symbolized a revolution that took place in the social status and liturgical ideas of the denomination."<sup>42</sup> And, as we were learning from Dr. Nuttall, what happened to the Congregationalists in one generation tended to be the fate of the Baptists in the next.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> K. Heasman, *Evangelicals in Action*, London, 1962.

<sup>2</sup> *vide* K. S. Inglis, *The Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England*, London, 1963, p. 67 ff, K. Heasman, *op. cit.*, p. 48 ff.

<sup>3</sup> W. Booth, *In Darkest England and The Way Out*, London, 1890, p. 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> Inglis, *op. cit.*, p. 209-10.

<sup>5</sup> W. T. Whitley, *A Baptist Bibliography, Vol. I, 1526-1776, Vol. II, 1777-1837*, London, 2 vols., 1916, 1922.

<sup>6</sup> E. A. Payne, *The Baptist Union: A Short History*, London 1959.

<sup>7</sup> B. L. Manning, *The Protestant Dissenting Deputies*, Cambridge 1952.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii-viii.

<sup>9</sup> E. K. H. Jordan, *Free Church Unity: History of the Free Church Council Movement, 1896-1941*, London 1956.

<sup>10</sup> H. S. Skeats and C. S. Miall, *History of the Free Churches of England, 1698-1891*, London n.d.

<sup>11</sup> E. R. Norman, *Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England*, London 1968.

<sup>12</sup> G. F. A. Best, "The Religious Difficulties of National Education in England, 1800-70." *Camb. Hist. Journ.* 1956, p. 155-73.

<sup>13</sup> *Vide*, for example (i) The Debate on the Church of Scotland of 1843 in Parliamentary Debates, March 1843 (Hansard 354-442, 441-512) and W. L. Mathieson, *Church and Reform in Scotland 1797-1843*, Glasgow 1910. H. Watt, *Thomas Chalmers and the Disruption*, Edinburgh 1943. (ii) more generally D. Nicholls, *Church and State in Britain since 1820*, London 1967.

<sup>14</sup> E. Routley, *The Story of Congregationalism*, London 1961, pp. 19, 103.

<sup>15</sup> R. D. Altick, *The English Common Reader*, Chapter V, Chicago 1957.

- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.  
<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.  
<sup>18</sup> E. Halévy, *History of the English People*, London 1951 edition, IV p. 390.  
<sup>19</sup> *Edinburgh Review*, 1808, p. 341.  
<sup>20</sup> A. Peel, *These Hundred Years*, London 1931, p. 133.  
<sup>21</sup> A. Peel, *Letters to a Victorian Editor*, London 1929.  
<sup>22</sup> Cited Peel, *These Hundred Years*, p. 138.  
<sup>23</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, Vol. II, p. 268.  
<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 269-81  
<sup>25</sup> Matthew Arnold, *The Nineteenth Century*, May 1887.  
<sup>26</sup> Ensor, *England 1870-1914*, Oxford 1936, p. 310 ff.  
<sup>27</sup> T. H. Darlow, *W. Robertson Nicholl*, London 1925, p. 375.  
<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.  
<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.  
<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.  
<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 344-5.  
<sup>32</sup> *British Weekly*, July 1887.  
<sup>33</sup> Mr. Spurgeon came by train from London Bridge to Sydenham, Miss Thompson walked the not inconsiderable journey from North Brixton. C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, London 1897, Vol. II, p. 13.  
<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 48-9.  
<sup>35</sup> I have a cup and saucer celebrating the Primitive Methodist Jubilee of 1857, a Wesleyan Jug depicting their centenary in 1839, and a Temperance Cup, boldly commanding 'Put no alcohol in me' and featuring the portraits of General Neal Dow, the chief protagonist of the campaign for the Maine Law, who visited England in 1857, 1866 and 1873.  
<sup>36</sup> J. Betjeman, *First and Last Loves*, London 1952, p. 103 (my italics).  
<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101-2.  
<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97-8.  
<sup>39</sup> M. S. Briggs, *Puritan Architecture*, London 1946.  
<sup>40</sup> H. Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 50.  
<sup>41</sup> C. Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, 1840, p. 247.  
<sup>42</sup> H. Davies, *op. cit.* p. 38.

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