

FAITH COOK

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# England's First Evangelical Woman Bishop? The Influence of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon (1707-1791)

**In this, the second in our series of articles examining evangelicals of the past, Faith Cook introduces the Countess of Huntingdon. She vividly portrays the Countess' power and influence in the eighteenth century church, through her church-building and training and personal support of evangelical ministers. Her inspirational vision and energy are described and her significance demonstrated not only for the Church of England but for Dissent and the wider church.**

Lady Huntingdon sets Christians of all time an example. She devoted herself, her name, her means, her time, her thoughts, to the cause of Christ.... She acted as one ought to act who considers this life a pilgrimage, not a home.... She was a representative of the rich becoming poor for Christ, of delicate women putting off their soft attire and wrapping themselves in sackcloth for the kingdom of heaven's sake.<sup>1</sup>

One might imagine these were the words of some sycophant of the Countess of Huntingdon, of some ardent member of the Connexion of Churches which she established and which still continues today. Far from it. Cardinal John Henry Newman was no admirer of evangelicals but, writing fifty years after Selina's death, he was magnanimous enough to appreciate the selfless sacrifice of this noble-minded woman and her contribution to the spread of the Christian message both in England and further afield.

It was not only clergy who placed a high evaluation on the Countess' contribution to the cause of Christ. King George III himself was heard to exclaim, 'I wish there was a Lady Huntingdon in every diocese in the kingdom!' In case we are still in any doubt, he continued, 'There is something so noble, so commanding and so engaging about her that I am quite captivated with her ladyship. She is an honour to her sex and the nation.'<sup>2</sup>

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1 John Henry Newman, *Essays Critical and Historical*, Basil Pickering, London 1871, vol.1, pp 387-8.

2 Aaron Seymour, *The Life and Times of Selina Countess of Huntingdon*, 1840, vol.2, p 283.

Who then was the Countess of Huntingdon and why do we know so little of her life and influence today? The problem can be laid in part at the door of the Countess herself. In her will she specifically stipulated that no biography should be written of her and that no use be made of her many letters. More than this, she asked to be buried in an unmarked grave with only two or three to attend the committal. Such was the respect for her wishes that no biography was attempted until 1840, almost 50 years after her death in 1791. Then Aaron Seymour published his two volumes, *The Life and Times of Selina Countess of Huntingdon*. The work, crammed with astonishing detail on all aspects of the eighteenth century revival, tends to be long-winded and written with a fawning regard for the aristocracy. In more recent years, however, there has been a renewed interest in this woman whose shadowy figure sweeps through the pages of evangelical church history, and an attempt has been made by a number of writers to evaluate her contribution. Several doctoral theses have also been written on some aspect of the life and work of the Countess.<sup>3</sup>

### Early life and conversion

A brief glance at the main facts of the life of this remarkable woman (whose years spanned almost the entire eighteenth century) may therefore be helpful, prior to any consideration of her contribution to the life and testimony of the Established Church, to Dissent and to the vast numbers of unchurched men and women both in Britain and overseas.

Selina Shirley was born at Astwell Manor House near Brackley in Northamptonshire in August 1707. Among a handful of powerful English landowners, the Shirleys were one of the country's oldest and most aristocratic families. Washington Shirley, Selina's father, had recently joined an Irish regiment so most of Selina's early childhood was spent in Carrickmacross where the Shirleys also owned property. Her life was sadly disrupted at the age of six, however, when her mother left her father and went to France, taking with her Selina's younger sister. Returning from Ireland when she was ten, Selina lived with her father and older sister in London until the wrangling over family property was almost settled. She then came to Staunton Harold in Leicestershire where she met Theophilus Hastings, 9<sup>th</sup> Earl of Huntingdon, whose family owned extensive property in nearby Ashby-de-la-Zouch and other areas. In 1728, at nearly twenty-one, Selina married thirty-two year-old Theophilus and moved to Donington Hall, today the headquarters of British Midland Airways. It proved a happy marriage, with six children born in rapid succession.

Although the new Countess had much to make her content, she struggled against constant illness and an increasing sense both of the futility of her own life and that of the social group to which she belonged. In retrospect the 1730s appear

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3 Among recent publications or theses on the Countess, the most important are Alan Harding, *The Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion: a Sect in action in 18<sup>th</sup> century England*, OUP, Oxford 2003; Stanley Boyd Schlenker, *Queen of the Methodists, the Countess of Huntingdon and the Eighteenth Century Crisis of Faith and Society*, Durham Academic Press, Durham 1997; Wanda

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Willard Smith, *Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon*, Southern Methodist University, Texas 1995; Edwin Welch, *Spiritual Pilgrim, A Reassessment of the Life of the Countess of Huntingdon*, University of Wales Press, 1995; James E. Hull, 'The Controversy between John Wesley and the Countess of Huntingdon', unpublished PhD Thesis, Edinburgh 1959.

as highly significant years in the purposes of God. Firstly, there was the remarkable preaching of young George Whitefield for whom Selina's sister-in-law, Lady Betty Hastings, had provided financial assistance during his student days at Oxford. But when, following his ordination in 1736, Whitefield began to preach in the open air to vast crowds, neither Lady Betty nor Selina were best pleased; it was an offence against all their preconceived notions of religious decorum and a breach of contemporary church order. More than this, as John and Charles Wesley were to do after 1738, Whitefield was now proclaiming that men and women may be declared just in God's sight through faith alone and not by the merit of good works. Such a message was widely regarded as radical. Despite being enshrined in the *Thirty-Nine Articles* it sounded unfamiliar, even alien, to contemporary spirituality. Until recently these same men had been active disciples of a vigorous High Church movement that focused on the rediscovery of 'primitive Christianity' and the pursuit of practical piety.

This new work of God in Bristol and London soon came much closer to home. Lady Betty's sister, Lady Margaret Hastings, was converted through the preaching of Benjamin Ingham, a former member of the Oxford 'Holy Club'. 'Since I have known the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, I have been as happy as an angel,' announced Margaret artlessly to the increasingly unhappy Selina who was visiting her in June 1739. This was a dimension of religion entirely new to the orthodox but dissatisfied Countess and led directly to her conversion. That July, during a period of serious illness, she 'lifted up her heart to Jesus the Saviour'<sup>4</sup> with the earnest prayer that she too might know that happiness through Christ and the forgiveness of her sins that her sister-in-law had found. God heard her cry and soon all her distress and fears were removed.

The Countess was a woman who knew no half measures. Her whole being was now devoted to the cause of reaching others with that same message that had transformed her own life. Limited at first due to her family commitments, she nevertheless found a number of outlets for her new desire to serve God. Her endeavours to speak to others of their spiritual needs were ceaseless. In August 1742 she wrote: 'I let none pass by of any rank but I remind them of the fountain that is open for sin and uncleanness.' These included both the likes of the Duchess of Buckingham (who found the gospel message 'most repulsive and strongly tinged with impertinence') and those who lived and worked on her husband's estates. She also used every avenue to improve the quality of their lives with regard to their temporal and physical welfare, an early example of that zeal to benefit society later shown by many evangelicals. One aspect of these activities was the establishment of at least four schools in local villages for children who would otherwise have had little or no education.

### Early contribution to the Revival

The Wesley brothers began to receive Selina's warm support. The Methodists,<sup>5</sup> as they were now becoming widely known, had been described by one anonymous

4 Thomas Haweis, *History of...the Church of Christ*, 1800, vol.3. p 242.

5 The term 'Methodist' is used interchangeably with 'Evangelical' in this

article. It was only after the deaths of Selina and John Wesley in 1791 that 'Methodist' began to refer exclusively to the emerging denomination of Methodism.

pamphleteer as ‘crackbrained enthusiasts and profane hypocrites.’<sup>6</sup> Such was the opposition to their labours that similar opprobrium and worse was thrown at them from high and low. For one as far up the social ladder as the Countess of Huntingdon to identify herself with these despised people was a courageous and costly step. To Charles Wesley she could write, ‘I know I owe you all [i.e. everything]...my labours are wholly with a view to you and your brother’s advantage.’<sup>7</sup> John Wesley asked Selina’s advice regarding the publication of his early journals, and it was she who ‘rescued’ Charles from the influence of the Moravians when they began to propound teaching that appeared to her to deviate from the Scriptures.

Not only did the Countess identify herself with the Wesley brothers and other churchmen during those early days of the revival, she also established warm friendships with some of the leading Dissenters of the day. Philip Doddridge, pastor of Castle Hill Independent Church in Northampton and principal of a Dissenting Academy, was among her closest friends. She financed the costs of several hopeful young men attending his Academy; and when Doddridge appeared to be dying at only forty-nine years of age she raised funds to send him and his wife on a voyage to Lisbon, hoping it might aid his recovery.

The Countess’ own life was marked with much suffering. In 1743 two of her boys, Ferdinando (10) and George (14), died of smallpox soon after each other; but the greatest loss was that of her husband Theophilus in 1746 when Selina was only thirty-nine. Humanly speaking this was a bereavement that the Countess could never forget, and yet it can be said that ‘God meant it for good’ (Gen. 50:20). Soon the way began to open for Selina’s most important lifework, and the spring of her extraordinary usefulness and influence not only to the Church of England, of which she was a dedicated member, but to the whole church of Jesus Christ.

### **‘A good Archbishop’**

Her Ladyship looks like a good archbishop with his chaplains around him. Her house is indeed a Bethel. To us in the ministry it looks like a college. We have sacrament every morning, heavenly conversation all day, and preach at night. This is to live at Court indeed.<sup>8</sup>

This description of life at Ashby Place, a stately home nestling in the shadow of Ashby Castle where the Countess moved soon after her husband’s death, comes from the pen of George Whitefield. It sums up the new driving force of Selina’s life – to promote a renewal of spiritual life within the Established Church. For a variety of reasons, the Church had become weak, often inflexible, and largely out of touch with the common people. Selina would have deplored the political involvement and place-seeking of some clergy, and Robert Walpole had ensured that as many vacant sees as possible were filled with staunch Whig supporters. Deism’s attack on supernatural Christianity had gripped the minds of some thinkers

6 Cited by Luke Tyerman, *Life and Times of John Wesley*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1880, vol.1, p 328.

7 MS Letter 12 in John Rylands University Library of Manchester, written from Enfield, 4 June 1743.

8 George Whitefield, *Works*, London 1771, vol.2, p 381.

outside the church while a number of men of Latitudinarian or moderate principles were in positions of influence within. These moderates, with their emphasis on reasonableness and toleration, seldom proclaimed core Reformation doctrines such as justification by faith from their pulpits. Added to this, pluralism and absenteeism by clergy were common and often led to the neglect of the souls of the people.

As a loyal member of the Church, Selina's greatest desire was to see a reformation from within. None of the early Methodist leaders had any intention or desire to separate from the Church. However, John Wesley, who regarded himself a loyal member of the Church throughout his long life, had sown the seeds of separation from the earliest years of the Methodist movement. He had done so by introducing into the emerging societies features which could be described as 'irregular': unordained preachers, crossing parish boundaries, field preaching, and, most of all, preaching houses for Methodist gatherings. Although Methodist services were not normally held at times that clashed with the stated services of the parish churches (which all members of Wesley's societies were expected to attend), the problem of divided loyalties became ever more acute as the century progressed. From the 1750s onwards there was constant agitation among Methodist preachers for separation, and the people were often reluctant to attend parish churches where the clergy were hostile to their new-found faith.

If separation from the Church were not an option for the Countess, what steps could she take to encourage a reformation from within? To Selina there was only one answer: evangelical preachers must be ordained to fill parish pulpits – men who would bring the message of salvation to the people. As the Methodist movement had gained in strength and influence, the bishops had become more and more reluctant to ordain any whom they suspected of being 'enthusiasts', as they dubbed those who preached the necessity of the new birth. Here Selina now realised she had a unique role. With her position in society, on familiar terms with George II and many others in high places, she began to exert pressure on the bishops to ordain those whom she knew would preach an evangelical message. If one bishop would not oblige, she would try another and even a third, until she gained her desired end.

Such a strategy lies at the heart of Whitefield's description of Ashby Place. Selina would invite men who hoped for ordination to her home. When she had satisfied herself as to their gifts and calling and of their experience of true 'heart religion', she would begin to campaign on their behalf. A number of able and influential men gained ordination in this way. Martin Madan was one. His useful ministry, first in Lombard Street, London, and more especially at the Lock Chapel, can be traced to the pressure exerted by the Countess. In his biography of Whitefield, Luke Tyerman describes this plan:

There can be no doubt that this was the grand scheme now revolving in the mind of the illustrious Countess...Whitefield tried to raise up converted clergymen and the Countess procured them ordination and [later] built them chapels. The idea was grand – perhaps inspired – and the working it out was unquestionably the principal means of effecting the marvellous change that has taken place since then in the Established Church.<sup>9</sup>

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9 Tyerman, *Life of George Whitefield*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1877, vol.2, p 192.

Another significant figure whose influence was established largely as a result of the Countess' efforts was William Romaine. Dismissed from his position as Lecturer at St George's in Hanover Square, and with his ministry sharply curtailed, he received an invitation from Selina to become one of her personal chaplains. It was a lifeline for Romaine, and gave him the opportunity to continue his ministry from Selina's private home. When a vacancy occurred for the position of Rector of St Ann's, Blackfriars, the Countess campaigned ceaselessly for his appointment, seeing it as vitally important that significant London pulpits were filled by evangelicals. His appointment was initially countermanded by his opponents, but when the news came through in 1766 that Romaine had secured the nomination, Selina's joy was unbounded. So began an invaluable and influential ministry in the heart of London that lasted almost thirty years.<sup>10</sup>

### **Influence on the aristocracy**

Selina was not slow to exploit a further area of influence open to her by reason of her social status: that of reaching men and women of the higher echelons in society by her drawing room gatherings. Appointing George Whitefield as her personal chaplain in 1748, she invited what he called 'a most brilliant assembly' to her Chelsea home to hear him preach. Earls, dukes, politicians, lords, ladies, poets, orators and even royalty could all be found gathered in her home at different times.

The gatherings at Chelsea were profoundly interesting spectacles; and never till the day of judgement will it be ascertained to what extent the youthful Whitefield affected the policy of some of England's greatest statesmen and moulded the character of England's highest aristocratic families.<sup>11</sup>

By these means the Countess also threw a cloak of protection over the fledgling and persecuted Methodist movement, influencing the mindset of some of the country's policy makers and bringing consequences for good on the whole of English society. Men of political stature like Lord Dartmouth (later President of the Board of Trade and Colonial Secretary) were converted at such meetings. He then began to use his vast influence and wealth to support evangelical causes and to bestow livings in his gift (e.g. Olney in Buckinghamshire), to preachers such as John Newton.

### **A widening influence**

The numbers encouraged by the Countess can scarcely be reckoned up. She seemed to touch every part of the evangelical scene, reassuring and supporting 'gospel men' and even admonishing them at times if she felt they were mistaken in their understanding. Some might say she went too far and it was only her wealth and social status that gave her so much input into the lives of others. Ronald Knox disagrees

She did not domineer over them, did not put herself forward as a prophetess in the style of Madame Guyon. She devoted herself to praying for the effectiveness of their preaching...No, it is difficult to accuse her of going beyond her measure. And yet the ascendancy she seems to have established over their minds may well leave the reader gasping.<sup>12</sup>

10 See Tim Shenton, *An Iron Pillar, The Life and Times of William Romaine*, Evangelical Press, Darlington 2004.

11 Tyerman, *Whitefield*, vol.2, p 212.

12 Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1950, p 487.

We could choose a number of examples of churchmen whom the Countess influenced: John Fletcher of Madeley, Benjamin Ingham, John Berridge, Thomas Haweis, Augustus Toplady and many others, in addition to the Wesley brothers and George Whitefield. Perhaps one example must suffice. Henry Venn, born in 1724, was a Cambridge undergraduate converted after reading William Law's classic, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. Elements in Law's thinking led Venn, in his early preaching as a young curate in Clapham, to urge his congregations to seek assurance of salvation by living up to the standards of Christian perfection set forth by Law. Until he met the Countess. Invited by Whitefield to accompany him to her Bristol home, he discovered one who understood his position completely. Selina too had struggled under the burden of the implications of such teaching before her conversion. After Venn left she wrote him a remarkable and penetrating letter that reflects the acuteness of her mind and her clear doctrinal insight:

O my dear friend! We can make no atonement to a violated law – we have no inward holiness of our own; the Lord Jesus Christ is the Lord our Righteousness. Cling not to such beggarly elements, such filthy rags – mere cobwebs of Pharisaical pride – but look to him who hath wrought out a perfect righteousness for his people.... And now, my dear friend, no longer let false doctrine disgrace your pulpit. Preach Christ crucified as the only foundation of the sinner's hope....<sup>13</sup>

And Venn accepted Selina's words. They were life-changing; so much so that Whitefield could write to her, 'I believe his whole soul is gratitude to the divine author of his mercies and to you, the honoured instrument in leading him to the fountain of truth.'

The case of Henry Venn, who could describe the Countess as 'a star of the first magnitude in the firmament of the church', is of importance because of his later influence on the whole direction of the Church of England. Following his important ministry in Huddersfield, Venn went to Yelling, twelve miles from Cambridge. Many walked from Cambridge to Yelling to hear Venn preach, but more significantly he had a profound effect on the thinking of Charles Simeon, vicar of Holy Trinity, Cambridge, and through him on a generation of students. Venn's son, John, became rector of Clapham in 1792, and worked with the powerful parishioners – William Wilberforce, Henry Thornton, Zachary Macaulay and others (to be known as the Clapham sect) – who used their influence nationally for social and spiritual improvement. A far cry this may seem from that letter written to Henry Venn by Selina, yet it played a vital and providential link in a chain of events.

## Chapel building and Trevecca College

During the 1750s circumstances in the Countess' personal life led her to begin an extraordinary programme of chapel building, chiefly to provide pulpits for evangelical preachers to reach out to the vast numbers of unchurched people. These chapels were to be attached to her private residences, so avoiding the strictures placed on clergymen officiating in any but their own parishes. For some years the stratagem worked admirably. Residents of Brighthelmstone (Brighton), Lewes, Bristol, and most significantly Bath itself, all watched in amazement as new

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<sup>13</sup> Aaron Seymour, *Life and Times*, vol.1, p 225.

chapels were erected. Confining herself to ordained clergy at this time, Selina set up a circuit of preachers prepared to serve in these chapels in addition to their own parish duties.

Opposition to evangelical preachers was, however, increasing among the bishops. Nor was it easy for young evangelical men to gain entrance to the universities. With a mounting need to fill her various pulpits, the Countess began to discuss with friends the idea of a training school for young preachers. Consulting with Howell Harris, who had set up a religious community at Trevecca, Breconshire, she discovered he had long had the same vision. Together they planned the details and, before long, Trevecca College was born. An old farmhouse – still to be seen today and situated not five hundred yards from Harris' establishment – was to be transformed into suitable accommodation for students.

Then, in 1768, an event occurred which precipitated the Countess into this new phase of ministry faster than she had expected. This phase would increase her influence immeasurably, not just on the Established Church, but on Dissent and even as far off as the American colonies. Six students were expelled from St Edmund's Hall in Oxford for offering extempore prayers and attempting to preach without ordination. These expulsions created a storm of protest from a number of clergy and led to a typical eighteenth century 'pamphlet war'. The Countess could now see it was imperative to provide alternative means for educating evangelical ministers as they could no longer hope to gain places in Oxford or Cambridge.

On Selina's sixty-first birthday, 24 August 1768, Trevecca College was opened by George Whitefield. Fifteen students were admitted and, with one resident tutor and under the oversight of John Fletcher of Madeley, began their training. Initially the timetable was strenuous: subjects such as Greek, Latin and English (many early students were Welsh-speaking), with rhetoric and philosophy, in addition to biblical studies, formed their core curriculum. A letter from John Fletcher sets out exercises which he expected the students to accomplish, for example:

- 1) I desire you to turn the 39 Articles into as good classical Latin as you possibly can.
- 2) Write an English letter to a Deist to convince him of the truth of the Scriptures.
- 3) Make an English theme upon the mischief of unsanctified learning....

Bereaved of most of her large family (all but two had died by this time) Selina regarded her students as her own sons and cared personally for their physical and spiritual welfare. She herself selected some young men for training and examined others who applied or were recommended to her; she arranged their preaching itineraries, financed all their expenses and corresponded with each.<sup>14</sup> She could be dictatorial at times, particularly if any student demurred at the decisions made on his behalf. Whenever Selina was in residence at Trevecca, even after she turned seventy, she would appear in the hall immaculately dressed at 6.00 am and inspect

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<sup>14</sup> More than 3000 letters written to the Countess by her students are extant (in the Cheshunt Foundation Archives, Westminster College, Cambridge), reporting their various needs and progress.



each student as he filed past on his way to an early service of worship. She would 'cast a searching glance around her to satisfy herself that none appeared in negligent attire, or betrayed an inattention to the requirements of cleanliness,' reported John Clayton, an early Trevecca student.<sup>15</sup>

Requests soon poured in from all over the country for the services of Trevecca students. In order to meet the needs, the Countess strictly rationed the time her students were to stay in any given town. Two months was usually the limit, and though many wrote pleading for extra time in places where their labours were unusually blessed, the answer was almost always negative.

The plight of men and women who lived in areas where it was impossible to hear the gospel from any parish priest gave rise to a further feature of Selina's work: the amazing increase of her chapel building programme. In a period of five months in 1785, for example, nine new chapels were erected. Some were small but many provided accommodation for more than a thousand worshippers. These were financed at least in part by the Countess herself. Gone was the pretext that these were chapels attached to her private homes. Many were built in places where she had never set foot, nor was ever likely to; and in this respect, like John Wesley, she was certainly in breach of Church protocol and even the law of the land which stipulated 'A chapel cannot be built and used as such without the consent of the parson of the parish and when it is done with his consent, no minister can preach therein without licence from the Bishop of the diocese'.<sup>16</sup>

### The widening influence: Dissent

That final clause highlights another of her problems, one that evangelical men had faced for many years – securing ordination for her Trevecca students. Since the St Edmund's Hall debacle the position had worsened considerably. Now not even the Countess with all her persuasiveness could secure the desired ordination for her men. Only a handful of Trevecca students were ever accepted into the ministry of the Established Church.

These problems eventually led to the Countess' influence extending far beyond the reaches of the parish churches as her students increasingly became pastors of Dissenting churches. A few examples chosen at random from some of Trevecca's most notable men may be mentioned in this connection. John Clayton became pastor of the influential Weigh Bridge Presbyterian Church, London, in 1778; Anthony Crole undertook a twenty-six year pastorate at Pinner's Hall Independent Church; Thomas Snell Jones was ordained into the Presbyterian ministry when he became pastor of Lady Glenorchy's Edinburgh congregation in 1779, a position he held for fifty-eight years. Matthew Wilks followed George Whitefield at the Tottenham Court Road Chapel, and again had a long ministry of more than fifty years. He was also one of the Founding Fathers of the London Missionary Society.

Even though Trevecca had originally been set up to serve the needs of the whole church, the Countess was deeply disturbed by the drift of her former students into Dissent. Despite her founding principles, this was not what she, as a loyal

15 T. W. Aveling, *Memorials of the Clayton Family*, London 1867, p 17.

16 Cited by George Whitefield, from a House of Commons ruling he had received in

answer to a request from the Countess for a licence to place Tottenham Court Road Chapel under her protection. *Works*, London 1771, p 182.

churchwoman, wished. It took a courageous firebrand like John Berridge, vicar of Everton – one of the few unafraid to tell the Countess exactly what he thought – to reprimand her for her attitudes towards Dissent:

I regard neither high-church nor low-church nor any church, but the Church of Christ which is not built with hands, nor confined to a singular denomination...What will become of your students at your removal? They are virtual Dissenters now and will be settled Dissenters then...Dissenters may appear wrong to you, [but] God hath his remnant among them...<sup>17</sup>

And John Berridge was right. Although the Countess formed the *Countess of Huntingdon Connexion* of churches, a loose organisation intended to bind her chapels together using the Prayer Book and Anglican liturgy, more and more of them became Dissenting (mainly Congregational or Independent) churches after her death in 1791. By this means, sections of Dissent, which had in many respects been untouched by the revival, were revitalised and quickened.

### **A missionary Connexion**

The Countess saw her labours largely as a missionary endeavour. Time was at a premium: the souls of men and women were dying without the knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was therefore imperative her students should reach the largest possible number of people in the shortest possible time. This was the thinking behind her total unwillingness to allow her students to remain long in any one place: they must preach to the people, gather the converts into Societies, and then move on to some other place. While commendable in terms of the benighted state of vast areas of England during much of the eighteenth century, as the new century opened and a fresh and powerful work of God drew countless thousands into the churches of both the Old and New Dissent, the cry of the people was for settled pastors who could build up the converts in the faith. This was inimical to the whole founding principle of Trevecca and another major factor leading more and more of her students to leave the Connexion and to take up pastorates in Dissenting churches.

Selina's passion for evangelism led to considerable problems for some students and eventually to a serious drop in standards at Trevecca. The more gifted the preacher, the less likely he was to receive adequate training. Hardly had he arrived at college before he found himself appointed to some preaching station. Learning Greek and Hebrew came fairly low on the Countess' agenda. A number of letters show disappointed students complaining bitterly about the limited opportunity for academic training. William Roby (1766-1830) was one such student. Converted under John Johnson, an early Trevecca student, Roby applied to train at Trevecca. After only five weeks at college he found himself asked to preach in Malvern at least four or five times a week. No sooner had he finished there than the Countess sent him on to Worcester where he found congregations of up to eight hundred people. Young, inexperienced and often feeling inadequate, Roby decided to leave the college. He would later have a long and influential pastorate in Cannon Street Independent Church, Manchester.

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<sup>17</sup> John Berridge, *Whole Works*, (ed. R. Whittingham), London, 1864, pp 515-6.

As the Countess aged she retained full personal control of the students and sometimes allowed unsuitable candidates to enter the college. In 1787 one tutor complained that some entrants seemed to know as little of the Scriptures as they did of the Koran, while others lacked the intellectual capacity for the standards required. These, however, were exceptions. Of the 230 men estimated to have trained at Trevecca during Selina's lifetime, many could be numbered among the most outstanding preachers of the early nineteenth century.

## Yet further afield

The Countess' influence can be compared to the effect of a stone thrown into a pond with ever-increasing ripples extending outwards in concentric circles: to Church, to Dissent, to Scotland, to Ireland, to Wales and then yet further to some of the far flung parts of the world.<sup>18</sup> 'Give the Lord your youth and strength over the whole world,' the sixty-five-year-old Countess had urged her Trevecca students. Nor were these mere words. That same year (1772) she financed and equipped two young men to sail as missionaries to the East Indies and booked their passage on an out-going vessel. The mission failed because one candidate became homesick and returned to Wales, whilst the other disobeyed her instructions, taking paid employment in the British garrison on Sumatra.

Undeterred, the Countess prepared for a mission to Georgia and recruited five more of her students, with one young woman to act as housekeeper, to sail the following year. George Whitefield had bequeathed his Bethesda Orphan House with all its personnel and buildings to the Countess when he died in 1770. This was their immediate destination, with a longer-term project the evangelisation of the Indian peoples. This too was a partial failure due to the outbreak of the American War of Independence, a devastating fire that destroyed most of the buildings, and the defective leadership of William Piercy who exploited Selina's trust. It was not, however, an entire failure. All five young men (and the housekeeper who married one of the students) remained in America and most conducted long and useful ministries. After the war the Countess – who continually hoped that she herself might go as a missionary to the New World – sent further students to America and Nova Scotia. When Freetown in Sierra Leone was designated a haven for emancipated slaves in 1792, more than a thousand converts from the Countess' Nova Scotia churches made the hazardous journey to Africa, carrying their *Countess of Huntingdon* hymnbooks among their belongings. Even today there are still Countess of Huntingdon churches dotted around Sierra Leone!

## 'I am to be cast out'

As the century proceeded it became increasingly evident that the 'old bottles' of the Church of England's structures and canon law could no longer entirely contain the 'new wine' of the Evangelical Revival and the chapels built and supplied with preachers by the Countess. The moment of reckoning came as Selina ventured on the crowning project of her chapel-building endeavours. She arranged to

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18 For Scotland we note the profound effect on Lady Glenorchy; for Ireland, her students, especially John Hawkworth, set up several chapels in Dublin and further afield; a

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number of Welsh preachers were also influenced, including William Williams, Daniel Rowland, Howell Harris and later Thomas Charles of Bala.

purchase the Pantheon, a massive circular building that had been erected as a pleasure stadium in north London but had failed to attract sufficient custom. The building would seat up to five thousand worshippers and soon they flocked from their Clerkenwell homes to listen to the preachers appointed by the Countess. Adjacent to the new chapel, known as Spa Fields, was her own home, so legalising the project in her view. But she had reckoned without the hostility of William Sellon, curate of St James, Clerkenwell, who pursued the matter through the Consistory Courts until at last he had a ruling in his favour. Her preachers were to be banned from officiating in the Spa Fields pulpit.<sup>19</sup> Selina could see only too clearly the implications of this ruling for her entire enterprise. Writing to her son, Francis, she explained her dilemma:

The alternative for me plainly appears, viz – either shut up all my chapels in England and Wales which are numerous...or to submit to a demission from the church by a law now existing against me.<sup>20</sup>

The only solution was to register Spa Fields as a Dissenting chapel. A lonely and bitter decision for the Countess, she had few to support her. To one of her students she wrote sadly: 'I am to be cast out of the Church for what I have been doing these forty years – speaking and living for Jesus Christ.' Unwillingly Selina had to register all her chapels as Dissenting meeting places or face closing them down and depriving the people of a means of hearing the clear preaching of the gospel. At first, only Thomas Wills was prepared to preach for her at Spa Fields, becoming a Dissenter himself, and forfeiting his position as an Anglican clergyman.

Selina herself was never a Dissenter at heart. Her spirit was 'not that of theoretical dissent' wrote Bogue and Bennett in their classic three volume work *History of the Dissenters*.<sup>21</sup> Her greatness lay in her willingness to sacrifice that system of church government into which she had been born, and which she loved and revered, for the greater good of her entire work. Her action eased her path in another significant aspect: the vexed question of ordination for her students. On 9 March 1783 six young men were ordained at Spa Fields in a service lasting five hours. Each student had to give an account of his call to the ministry and solemnly undertake to abide by the Connexion's *Fifteen Articles* – a confession of faith modelled on the *Thirty-Nine Articles* and the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

Selina's bold move in cutting through the protocol that bound her Connexion to the Established Church had set a radical precedent which would pave the way for the Methodist movement as a whole to sever its links with the Church of England after Wesley's death.<sup>22</sup> It released the young churches, mainly comprising of converted men and women with little previous church background, from the tension of trying to balance the requirements of canon law with the new spiritual life to which they had been introduced. Her Connexion held a halfway position

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19 According to ecclesiastical law Sellon was in the right. Proprietary Chapels built and maintained by private individuals needed the incumbent's consent for their ministers to receive the necessary episcopal licence to preach.

20 Letter in Cheshunt Foundation Archives.

21 D. Bogue and J. Bennett, *History of the Dissenters from the Revolution to the Year 1838*, repr. Tentmaker Publications, Stoke-on-Trent 2000, vol.3, p 101.

22 Unpublished MA thesis by D. E. S. Brown entitled, 'Selina, Countess of Huntingdon: Leader of the First Dissenting Methodists' elaborates this theme. Southern Methodist University, Dallas, US, 1986.

between the Church and Dissent, using all the formularies of the Church and the liturgy of the Prayer Book in its services, yet independent of its restrictions.

### **Concluding assessment**

In conclusion we must attempt to sum up the contribution made by Selina Countess of Huntingdon to the overall life and work of the Church of Jesus Christ, not only in her own generation but also in terms of the legacy her endeavours bequeathed to English church life as a whole.

### **Areas of difficulty**

There were certain areas of difficulty which affected her work negatively both during her lifetime and in the longer perspective. These arose in part because of aspects of Selina's own temperament and circumstances. In common with the social hierarchy of the day, and the nobility in particular, Selina displayed a degree of imperiousness in handling others. Her position in society meant few felt able to offer advice or point out any perceived weakness in her actions. This inevitably led to mistakes being made. Had she listened to advice, for example, she might have discovered that William Piercy, whom she appointed to lead her American enterprise, already had a record of untrustworthiness. Understandably her upbringing, and the high place in society she enjoyed, influenced and coloured her perspective on her own exceptional position in church life. The Countess was quite able to dismiss a whole board of trustees of any given church in her Connexion when they did not comply with her requirements. This attitude contributed to the way she clashed on a number of occasions with John Wesley who could be equally dictatorial. In fact, John Berridge, vicar of Everton, referred to his two friends as Pope John and Pope Joan.

The Countess also found it hard to cope with the fact that many she had helped and regarded as her fellow workers disagreed with her move into Dissent, feeling they could best serve their generation by remaining within the Established Church. Widespread fear of Dissent with its loss of social privileges also governed their thinking. Selina regarded their attitudes as a betrayal of the truth, weakness, and an act of personal disloyalty, especially in the case of men like William Romaine who expressed his disagreements very strongly. As time went on, however, many of these relationships were healed.

### **The strengths of her work**

The Countess was undoubtedly a trail blazer. She has been described variously as 'an English Deborah', or with Horace Walpole, as 'the Queen of the Methodists.' The whole of the Wesleyan Methodist movement eventually followed Selina into Dissent, and Wesley emulated the example of her Connexion in ordaining his own preachers without the sanction of the Church from 1784 onwards.

Another significant aspect of her work was the upsurge in theological education, with a predominant emphasis on evangelism and itinerant preaching, based on the same principles as Trevecca College. A number of institutions were set up along similar lines: Lady Glenorchy's establishment at Oswestry; Newport

Evangelical Institution, Newport Pagnell in 1783; and Hoxton Academy begun in 1778.<sup>23</sup> Deryck Lovegrove expands this list further, adding academies at Bradford, Hackney, Manchester and Gosport. 'In most of the seminaries formed between 1768 and 1830 the influence of Trevecca can be traced,' Lovegrove maintains.<sup>24</sup> To this could be added even Spurgeon's Pastor's College, started in 1856 on similar principles.

Selina's personal strength lay in her extraordinary gifts as an organiser. Not only was she engaged in overseeing numerous churches throughout the length of the country, she also kept tracks on the day-to-day life and expenditures of Trevecca, maintained a huge correspondence with pastors and students and cared for George Whitefield's American enterprises. She did all this with failing health, deteriorating eyesight and suffering spasms of the throat that meant that sometimes she could swallow little more than a few teaspoonfuls of soup for nourishment.

### **The permanence of her work**

The Countess was undoubtedly the most outstanding woman of the eighteenth century revival. Through her influence, vast tracts of the country were evangelised. Nevertheless, the permanence of her work and contribution suffered because of some of her character flaws. She clung to her position of control over all aspects of her Connexion even when she was well over eighty years of age. At last, in 1790, the year before her death, she drew up the *Plan of Association* which would have safeguarded the future of the Connexion. But it was too late. Thomas Haweis, and even Lady Anne Erskine who had co-operated with her for many years, overturned her plans, taking authority themselves, so perpetuating her own authoritarian style of leadership. After they had died, the Connexion was beset with wrangling and discord and began a steady decline with most churches gradually drifting towards Congregationalism. Today just over twenty churches remain in the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion and most of these are small, even struggling causes.

And what of her legacy today? With Methodism and some other traditional denominations in what would appear to be terminal decline, the Countess would probably have viewed the disarray of the current religious scene with a mixture of astonishment and consternation. She might well be amazed at the lack of commitment and the unwillingness on the part of many today to sacrifice time, energy and resources to extend the frontiers of the kingdom of God. But one sphere of her influence surely remains, embodied in accounts of her life, the influence which Cardinal Newman admired. She expressed devotion to the cause of Christ, deep compassion for lost souls, and, we may add, exceptional vision and spiritual energy.

### **A completed work**

'My work is done; I have nothing left to do but to go to my Father,' whispered the frail eighty-three-year-old Countess the night before she died on 17 June 1791. To the very last she was planning further missionary endeavour. As news of her death spread, tributes of love and gratitude sounded from pulpits throughout the land.

23 G. F. Nuttall, *Significance of Trevecca College*, London 1968.

24 Deryck W Lovegrove, *Established Church, Sectarian People, 1780-1830*, CUP, Cambridge 1988, pp 68, 163.

Among the most moving was one from Thomas Wills, even though he had eventually been badly treated by 'her Ladyship':

She was one of the brightest luminaries that ever shone in the gospel hemisphere...Thousands, I may say tens of thousands in various parts of the kingdom, heard the gospel through her instrumentality that in all probability would never have heard it at all, and I believe through eternity will have cause to bless God that she ever existed.<sup>25</sup>

**Faith Cook** has a number of books in print, mainly biographical in character. These include a biography of William Grimshaw of Haworth (1997) and a full biography of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon (2001). She has recently written a new biography of Lady Jane Grey (2004), and *Our Hymn-Writers and their Hymns: An Evaluation of the Development of the English Hymn*. She is married to an Independent evangelical pastor.

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25 Anon., *Memoir of Thomas Wills*, London 1804, p 231.

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