

John Sutcliff of Olney

FEW places as small as Olney have as many claims to fame. In the realm of literature grateful minds turn Olney-ward remembering the gentle William Cowper. In the field of evangelical theology and hymnody, many dream of the Olney of the converted slaver, John Newton. Among the enthusiasts for the sphere of the great biblical commentators this little town is mentally noted for the sake of noble Thomas Scott. In the realm of church music, and especially in the fascinating study of hymn-tunes, the informed gladly recall that the celebrated Dr. Henry John Gauntlett, composer of innumerable hymn-tunes, learned his first music and played his first notes here at Olney.

John Sutcliff¹ knew them all. Cowper and Newton were here when he came in 1775. Thomas Scott was already in the district, being then curate at Ravenstone and, at the turn of the century, succeeded Newton at Olney. Gauntlett may or may not have remembered Sutcliff as a prematurely ageing man of sixty-one in 1814. But Sutcliff's dying memory of Gauntlett was that of a precocious child of nine who presided at the new organ in the parish church of which his father was the incumbent.

When Sutcliff came to Olney he was within two months of his twenty-third birthday. Those twenty-three years held a remarkable story. He was the son of a godly Yorkshire farmer. His parents early instructed him in godliness, and he as early went to work on their farm. Outside his own family he was indebted to two ex-Methodists—Dan Taylor and John Fawcett. Fawcett had been converted under George Whitefield, and while both he and Taylor retained the fervour of their Methodism, they tempered it with the Calvinistic stability that they could find only among the Baptists. Both became pastors of small Baptist causes near Sutcliff's home. At fifteen, Sutcliff evinced a yearning for knowledge, began assisting Taylor in his school at Birchcliffe, Hebden Bridge, and Taylor taught him Latin in return. At seventeen, Sutcliff had been won for Christ, was baptised by John Fawcett and joined his church at Wainsgate. For two years Fawcett was his minister and mentor. Sutcliff entered into a correspondence with him relative to certain bitter discouragements in his own Christian life and experience. Fawcett was not slow to discern the qualities in the youth and gratified his every quest

¹ Sutcliff was born on 9th August, 1752.

for spiritual and academic learning. On Fawcett's side this association of Sutcliff and himself eventuated in the founding of Rawdon Baptist College. On Sutcliff's side it set his feet on the road to the ministry via Bristol Baptist College—and that literally as well as metaphorically. For in the depth of the winter of 1772, John Sutcliff walked the 200 miles from Wainsgate, near Hebden Bridge, in Yorkshire, to Bristol. His object in walking was to save some twenty shillings with which to buy books for his college course. This "pet economy" of his, we are told, was a habit.

At Bristol, under Hugh and Caleb Evans—Baptist worthies of their day—for two-and-a-half years Sutcliff's academic record was brilliant, while his preaching attachment to the church at Trowbridge led that church to seek (but unsuccessfully), to secure him as its minister. A manuscript in Sutcliff's own hand in Bristol College Library enumerates certain "observations or rules" that he laid down for his own conduct and which, as his subsequent life shows, were well kept. After about a year at Bristol, Sutcliff suffered the shock of the loss of several of his relatives, and, in particular, a bosom friend and brother beloved of his own age, William Tommas, in a smallpox scourge that affected severly the West Riding of Yorkshire. John Fawcett wrote him the news about his friend Tommas, and it seems to have deeply affected him, solemnizing his thoughts on life and death.

Although he will always be known as "Sutcliff of Olney," it is but fair to say that he spent six months in Shrewsbury and another six in Birmingham before he came here. While in Shrewsbury he received, in November, 1774, a letter written at the instigation of John Ryland by a Mrs. Mary Andrews, on behalf of the Olney church. It was a request that he would come and preach "with a view", because the church was in a poor state. Its membership had fallen to thirty-eight, and there was no-one to minister the Word. After he had served the old Cannon Street Church in Birmingham, whose minister, the Rev. Mr. Turner, was ill, for six months, Sutcliff finally came to Olney in July, 1775. So the year that saw Thos. Scott settling at Ravenstone, Fuller ordained at Soham, and Carey apprenticed to Clarke Nichols at Piddington, saw also Sutcliff arriving in Olney for a ministry that lasted till his death thirty-nine years later.

Mary Andrews who had written the beseeching letter to Sutcliff was the widow of Squire Andrews, and a prominent member of the church. When Sutcliff arrived he freely tutored her young son in return for accommodation in her large house next to the chapel. There Sutcliff lived until Mrs. Andrews died in 1795 and he himself married in 1796, and thus he was able to purchase books

and to build up what Andrew Fuller afterwards described as "one of the best libraries in this part of the country," which went at his decease to Horton Academy, now Rawdon College.

Sutcliff's first four years in Olney were John Newton's last. We have the evidence of Newton's diary that they were years of deep brotherly fellowship between the two men. On several occasions Newton deferred an engagement at the Parish Church in order to attend a special meeting "at Mr. Sutcliff's." It was Newton who instituted the annual united New Year Services for the young at Olney, which continued until recent years; and twice he writes with feeling and enthusiasm of what he had heard from Mr. Sutcliff's lips at those gatherings.

Before Sutcliff had been in Olney six months there was a gathering of Baptist Ministers here; Newton was present, welcomed and loved by them all. The following day Sutcliff had the first baptisms (six) of his ministry. Was Newton there? The Northamptonshire Baptist Association of 1776 met in Olney, and Newton met with it. In fact, he gave John Ryland of Northampton and Joshua Symonds of Bedford lodging at the vicarage. Into the midst of all this brotherly evangelical fervour young Sutcliff had come. It was at these very meetings that he first set eyes on Andrew Fuller and John Ryland, and formed with them an abiding friendship that led Robert Hall afterwards to refer to the three of them as "that lovely triumvirate."

It is impossible to sever Sutcliff from the early missionary enterprise, and to speak of him without speaking of it would be to distort the subject. The common outlook among Baptists at the time of Sutcliff's youth was hyper-Calvinistic. God's predestination was so excessively stressed that man's responsibility vanished. Sutcliff shared this position for a few years but, by 1780, when he had been at Olney only five years, he was in trouble with some of his people for shedding the fatalism and therefore the antinomianism from his theology. It is a remarkable thing that Fuller, Ryland, and Hall (senior) all became unsettled on these points about the same time. Within five years both Hall, *Helps to Zion's Travellers*, 1781, and Fuller, *Gospel Worthy of all Acceptation*, 1785, had expressed themselves outspokenly in print on the subject. It was a movement of the Spirit, though in Sutcliff's case it came through his reading of Jonathan Edwards and David Brainerd, and—as the writer thinks—through the wholesome influence of John Newton and his moderate, evangelical Calvinism.

This breath of the Spirit was the precursor of the veritable tornado that was to break ten years later. The next gust came in 1784, when Sutcliff persuaded the Association to recommend all the churches to "set apart an hour in the evening of the

first Monday of the month for social prayer for the success of the Gospel, and to invite Christians of other denominations to unite with them in it." The idea itself was not new. The Scots ministers of fifty years before had done it. Jonathan Edwards had done it in his "Humble Attempt." But what was new was the forthright and distinctive missionary emphasis that lay behind this "Call to Prayer."

Of all this Sutcliff was the moving spirit, and the movement continued when, the following year, Carey began his two year's close association with Sutcliff in the membership of this church. Then, Carey became an out-pupil of Sutcliff; Sutcliff directed his reading and study, and was thus one means among others in the hand of God towards the preparation of Carey for his specific missionary vision.

So matters progressed. The next stage of crucial importance was the ministers' meeting at Clipstone in 1791. Fuller and Sutcliff were the preachers. Fuller discoursed on "The Pernicious Influence of Delay," and Sutcliff on "Jealousy for the Lord of Hosts." In that sermon Sutcliff propounded the lawyer's question—"Who is my neighbour?"—and answered it like this: "By your neighbour, brethren, you do not mean the man who lives next door. You mean a fellow creature, a member of the human race . . . let him be an ignorant Negro . . . or an untutored savage . . . he is your neighbour . . . He has a soul . . . a soul that will exist for ever—a soul that has interests equally important with those of your own." Here was Sutcliff pleading the very cause that Carey was to plead. And Carey knew, when he preached his "deathless sermon" at Nottingham the following year, that of all men John Sutcliff endorsed his sentiments. Not only that; before Carey preached his sermon on that memorable day, he had the encouragement of hearing Sutcliff introduce, at the morning session, the business of the day. Wm. Carey is rightly, and with all honour, styled the "Founder" of the Baptist Missionary Society; but John Sutcliff by God's use of him, on the one hand to prepare the churches through prayer, and on the other to prepare Carey through influence and tuition entitles him to be acclaimed the "Father" of the Missionary Society.

What was Sutcliff like as a man? Nearly six feet in height, thin in his earlier years, he had a decided Roman nose that became the butt for facetious remarks among his intimate friends. Fuller describes his face as "grave but cheerful, and his company always interesting." In preaching, Sutcliff was quiet and persuasive rather than gesticulating and rhetorical. He became known as being cautious and capable, and his counsel was sought after from a very wide area. Even Andrew Fuller admitted that when

he was puzzled by the affairs of the Mission, he would saddle his horse and ride to Olney where, with Brother Sutcliff at hand, he could see things much clearer than at Kettering.

It has been supposed that there is no portrait of Sutcliff extant. The writer has lately discovered an old "souvenir portrait gallery" which includes, among other ministers, a likeness of John Sutcliff. An enlarged reproduction of this likeness hangs in the vestibule of the Olney church today, and will afterward find its permanent home in the Cowper-Newton Museum. A similar likeness, however, is included in one of two composite frames now placed in the vestry.

Of the many distinctive features of Sutcliff's ministry, his connection with the Northamptonshire Baptist Association (of which, his predecessor, poor persecuted William Walker, was one of the founders) is worthy of remark. In those days the Association included also churches in large parts of Lincolnshire, Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, Rutland, Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire. In his thirty-nine years at Olney, Sutcliff took a prominent part in upwards of thirty-two annual assemblies. On fourteen different occasions he preached to the Association. Eight times he wrote its annual Circular Letter to the churches. Perhaps the Association's greatest tribute to his integrity and worth was that it appointed him Moderator no less than eight times! "There were giants in the land in those days" and among them, and above them, stood this fine man of pure heart, utter consecration, and devout service—John Sutcliff, respected, loved and admired by them all.

Sutcliff's ministerial life is marked by two clear stages or periods. The first began when he came to Olney, and ended when the Missionary Society was formed and the first missionaries had sailed for India. That was in 1793. Until then he had been planning, promoting, persuading. Nothing essential ceased after this time, but something of greater priority emerged, and God fitted him for it. The Mission was begun, but who was to train the future missionaries? Others might help, and did. But the minds of those who were at the heart of the enterprise were fixed on one man, and that man was John Sutcliff. He had learning, and he had the ability to impart learning. In that very year Providence College of Rhode Island recognised his outstanding ministerial and scholastic abilities by awarding him its honorary Master of Arts degree.

Sutcliff remained unmarried until he was forty-three or forty-four years of age. By 1796 he found his life partner in Jane Johnston of Olney, and a home of his own in Olney High Street. He annexed the house next door and turned it into a residential academy for missionary and ministerial students. There—in what

are now 21 and 23 High Street—until he died in 1814, Sutcliff received and trained upwards of thirty-two men. Among them were Daniel Brunson, William Robinson, and Eustace Carey—nephew of William—and other noted pioneer missionaries. There were others who went into the home ministry, such as the distinguished Christopher Anderson who came all the way from Edinburgh, and afterwards returned to do a tremendous work in the Baptist interest in Scotland. Anderson's portrait in oils hangs today in the vestry of the largest Baptist Church in Scotland—Charlotte Chapel, Edinburgh—which he founded.

C. H. Spurgeon once said, "He who converts a soul draws water from a fountain; but he who trains a soul-winner digs a well from which thousands may drink to life eternal." Sutcliff dug his well, deep and wide. None can tell how many have drunk of life eternal because of the academy in Olney High Street.

These are glimpses—and glimpses only—at one of the most remarkable men that Olney ever knew, and that the Baptist Denomination ever had; a man who was a great gift of God to His church for the hour that he so perfectly matched. Had Sutcliff, like Newton, kept a full diary, or, like Cowper and Scott, committed all his work to writing, he might have become as well-known as they. But he was a man who sought self-obscurity in order that his Saviour might be exalted. When dying Carey, in 1834, told his flattering friends not to talk of Carey, but of Carey's Saviour, he echoed Sutcliff's sentiments of a similar hour twenty years before. To someone who reminded him of his achievement in extending the cause of Christ, Sutcliff answered: "It is all as nothing. I must enter heaven on the same footing as the penitent thief; and I shall be glad to take a seat by his side."

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