

# Baptist Wriothesley Noel

## ANGLICAN — EVANGELICAL — BAPTIST

**T**HE *TIMES* of Tuesday, November 28th, 1848, carried a note of great interest to the Establishment. Tucked discreetly in the midst of page five, it briefly reported the secession of a famous cleric from the Church of England. The fanfare that accompanied the withdrawal of John Henry Newman from the discipline of Canterbury to that of Rome had scarcely begun to subside when the secession of the Evangelical party's leading spokesman, Baptist W. Noel, erupted on the London church scene.

On Sunday, November 26th, St. John's Chapel in Bedford Row was crowded to overflowing. *The Times* reporter was barely able to obtain standing room, for ". . . a large number of persons were evidently attracted to the Chapel by curiosity, to ascertain the 'reasons' assigned by Noel for his proximate secession from the established church. They were, however, 'sent empty away' for the rev. gentleman, in the course of his long and able discourse, did not make the most remote allusion to the subject."<sup>1</sup> Although the formal announcement of Noel's move had been made on the previous Wednesday evening, the *Times* correspondent intimates that the possibility of the event had been an open secret for some time. The Bishop of London had either been completely unaware of the developing situation or had chosen a "wait and see" policy, for it was not until November 28th that he sent for the erring cleric. When the bishop discovered that the rumours were true he forbade Noel from further preaching within the diocese of London. Noel chose however to ignore the bishop's order since he had not had the opportunity to speak to his entire congregation. His immediate concern was for the welfare of the congregation whom he wished to provide with ample time for filling the pulpit with strong leadership, hopefully within six months.<sup>2</sup>

Thus it was on Sunday, December 3rd, 1848, at the age of fifty years, that Noel took his leave from the St. John's Chapel and his career in the Established Church. Noel's secession was symptomatic of the increasing pressure within the Establishment to silence the offensive Evangelical party. This piously motivated group within the Church of England was an outgrowth of the Wesleyan revivals of the eighteenth century, revivals that brought rise to a rejuvenated nonconformity but failed to "leaven the lump" of the lethargic state church. The pious Anglican Wesley had filled the pews of

dissent but had only a slight impact upon his own communion. Yet the evangelicalism of Wesley nevertheless had a tremendous influence upon the few. The names of Wilberforce, Macaulay, John and Henry Thornton, and John Newton are but a sampling of those within the church that heeded the call to personal piety and sustained evangelism. The tremendous influence of this group (which never constituted more than ten per cent of the church) receded sharply in the period immediately following the death of Wilberforce in 1833. While Newman was riding the crest of his move for reformation, Noel was being dragged under by the ecclesiastical crosscurrent and undertow which finally precipitated his secession.<sup>3</sup>

Noel, the brother of the Earl of Gainsborough, was born at Leightmount, Scotland, in 1798. He was the sixteenth child and eleventh son of Sir Gerald Noel, Bart. Educated at Westminster School and Trinity College, Cambridge, he received his M.A. in 1821. Before taking orders Baptist had for some time strongly considered reading for the bar and had been tutored by a special pleader in the Temple. He however abandoned the idea and turned to the church.

His first charge was for a brief time as curate of Cosington, Leicestershire, quite near the Gainsborough ancestral home at Oakham.<sup>4</sup> Although there is nothing to indicate when he chose to follow the religious pattern of the evangelical we can be certain that he had become vocal in his views at some time prior to 1827 for in that year he was called to serve St. John's Chapel in Bedford Row, London. St. John's Chapel was in itself a strange entity for it was wholly subscribed by local evangelicals and merely tolerated by the parish incumbent. It had had such famous preachers as Thomas Scott, Richard Cecil and Daniel Wilson in its brief history, as well as the better known lay names of Wilberforce, Thornton and Macaulay. Following a line of well known evangelical pastors into this unconsecrated pulpit, Noel soon established himself as the leader of the evangelicals in the metropolitan area.

A vigorous advocate of the stylized evangelical approach to religion he was in the *avant-garde* of those promoting home and foreign missions. Perhaps his earliest incursion into print was in the form of an open letter to the Bishop of London concerning the spiritual condition of the metropolis. His conclusion can be summed up quite simply—deplorable.<sup>5</sup> This letter published in 1835 was to be an accurate portent of things to come for it was not enough that he held an unconsecrated pulpit but that from almost the beginning of his ministry he was to stand in open criticism of the established pattern of the national church.

His interest in the educational needs of England's children earned him a place on a board of enquiry constituted by the Royal Com-

mission on Education. This board was created to evaluate the effectiveness of the elementary schools of Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and certain other towns. His visits included both National and Lancastrian schools and in both systems he found reason to be dismayed. Questioning the schoolboys he received an overwhelming number of abysmal and ridiculous answers. He was on occasion told that Liverpool was an island; Lancashire was one of the great towns of England; and Asia and America were European countries. The recommendations made by Noel included government help in school construction: government provision of teacher training schools; the subsidization of the better masters with government funds; the production of new textbooks (offering prizes to the authors) that would be unobjectionable to all parties concerned; prizes for tracts to educate the parents to the need of their children's education and finally prizes for tracts dealing with the overall need for popular education.

Although laudable by modern standards of educational thought his report as published in 1842 brought immediate and violent censure from nonconformity's leading editor, the Baptist Thomas Price of *The Eclectic Review*. (The student of Victorian voluntarism has no trouble in understanding and predicting the criticisms levelled against Noel's plan of reforming the educational system.) Basically the objections of Price were focused on Noel's "pessimism" with regard to the results achieved by the nonconformist-supported British and Foreign School Society and secondarily against the "blatant" invitation of government interference in education.<sup>6</sup>

During the Chartist agitation in 1841 Noel was thrust into the public eye when his one penny *Plea for the Poor* appeared in the booksellers' shops. This plea constituted the sole pamphlet from an Anglican's pen denouncing the Corn Laws. Information provided by the publisher of this pamphlet indicates that at least 23,000 copies of this free-trade tract were circulated.<sup>7</sup>

That same year Noel was gazetted as one of Queen Victoria's chaplains despite the strenuous objections of many churchmen. *The Quarterly Review* chose this occasion to review both the *Plea for the Poor* and the event of the gazetting. "We have read this pamphlet, and, had it been anonymous, we should have thought it to be the work of some crazy canter . . ." The gazetting is ". . . an outrage on decency, on the Church, on the Constitution, and on the Queen's Majesty, only to be equalled by the former presentation at Court of the socialist Owen."<sup>8</sup> The Anti-Corn Law League later used excerpts from the *Plea* to support its nation-wide agitation. His free-trade opinions coupled with his outspoken comments on the Establishment had drawn invective glances from the Church during the early 1840's. This estrangement became most

evident in 1845 over the question of the increased endowment of the Roman Catholic Maynooth College.

This seminary in Ireland had been founded by the government to court the allegiance of the Irish priest in the days of the French Revolution. Prior to Maynooth all of the Irish priesthood had been educated in France. There was no immediate opposition to the college; however, within the short span of fifty years, it constituted one of the most bitterly fought issues to arise between organized religion and the Parliament. It is a unique instance of the Church and Nonconformity organizing to oppose a bill that proposed to increase aid by the state (from £9,000 to £26,000 per annum) to the seminary for "popish priests." The principles behind the opposition were radically different. The Nonconformists opposed it because of their concerted opposition to any state subsidy of religion; the churchmen opposed it on the grounds that the bill would further jeopardize the favoured position of the Establishment in Ireland.

As an Evangelical representative, Noel had been requested by the Central Anti-Maynooth Committee (Anglican) to accompany Sir Culling Eardley Smith to Dublin to investigate the problem at first hand. Noel refused to go unless he were able to exercise complete liberty of judgment and speech on the issue. The committee declined to relinquish such a privilege to a man it obviously felt (from past experience) would not hold the party line. The refusal kept Noel in England but it failed to keep him quiet. Noel soon appeared at the very vortex of the agitation by answering the "faithlessness" of the committee with a vigorous letter to the Irish Protestant Bishop of Cashel.

This open letter was entitled quite simply *The Catholic Claims*. The theme of the polemic rested on the premise that any subsidization of religion—Roman, Established or Dissenting—was an illegal infringement of the state upon religion. He called for ". . . those who think the principle of that measure unsound, to consider what course their duty prescribes to them for the future." Thomas Price of *The Eclectic Review* in a disarming burst of enthusiasm claimed that ". . . the appearance of a letter like this from such a man is a significant sign of the times . . . The church question is obviously becoming the question of the times . . ." The publication of such a tract ". . . required a more than ordinary strength of conviction, a rare superiority to the prejudices of his class, and a degree of moral courage with which few are endowed."<sup>9</sup>

The stimulus for this commentary came from Noel's final analysis in which he denied that the church had sanction to receive state financial support or be subjected to any form of external interference.

"If parliament cannot legislate in favour of true religion (Anglican) they are bound not to legislate against it; if they think it imprudent to support the truth alone, let them leave both truth and error unsupported: . . . Having maintained twelve hundred Protestant ministers in Ireland, that they may preach the gospel to the people, because it was right, ministers (of the government) seem now disposed to educate and maintain two thousand priests to contradict them, because it is expedient. Two great theological armies in the field, each bent on the rout and ruin of the other, they are henceforth to be both generously supplied with ammunition from the same arsenal."<sup>10</sup>

Donning the mantle of prophecy Noel declared that the ". . . principle of paying all creeds is so irreligious, that no nation which is not generally irreligious can long endure it. On this account it seems probable that the maintenance of the Roman Catholic priest would seal the doom of the three establishments in England, Scotland, and Ireland . . . already had the Maynooth Bill given the greatest shock to the establishments of the United Kingdom which they have yet received: and should its principle lead further to the endowment of the Roman Catholic Church, they must shortly fall."<sup>11</sup>

Not content to register only his opinion on the religious issue he attacked the government's overall Irish policy. He argued that if England were to be called a Christian nation with any justification, she must not only give the six and one-half million Irishmen religious freedom but that they must also be given their political freedom. Ireland must have fair laws, a fair administration of justice, representation in Parliament, a fair share of the honours and emolument of the state and help for her starving people. Finally, the Irish must be released from being ". . . called to maintain a national establishment of Protestant ministers to subvert their own creed . . . You call it religious; we declare it to be unjust . . . RELIGIOUS EQUALITY OR REPEAL."<sup>12</sup>

With tongue in cheek, Noel supported his proposals by outlining two ways of approaching a solution to the Irish problem: raise the pay of the priest to that of the Protestant or bring the Protestant down to the level of the priest. One thing was manifestly clear in 1845: the Maynooth Grant was but a pittance, wholly inadequate for its intended task; if endowment is the way then it must in fairness be equal; since the Roman Catholics outnumber the Protestants eight to one then there should be eight times the priests and prelates; since the established church receives £550,000 per year the Roman communion should have £4,400,000 to be equitable; the Roman prelates must not only have reasonable incomes but they must also have seats in the Lords; there is no way out—for

either you pay the ministers of all denominations or you pay none.

The author's passion for a church freely supported by the people and without any form of coercion led him to suggest further that as the present incumbents died, the state should sell the property of the Establishment to the benefit of Roman and Protestant alike. This was based on the historical observation: "What the state took from the Catholic priests, because it believed that their holding of it was detrimental to the general welfare, it may certainly withhold from Protestant ministers, when all parties see that they could not receive it without similar detriment to the commonwealth . . ."

Finally in a rather more personal vein Noel urged the Bishop of Cashel and his churchmen to advocate their own disestablishment and that of the entire Irish Church. It is at this moment that the evangelical colours fly from the argumentative masthead. Underlying the thesis advocated by Noel was the conviction that the church in Ireland had completely failed to be a missionary church. The doctrine of evangelism—the heart and soul of the Wesleyan conviction—began to speak most clearly in this letter: "Long has the church been rendered incapable of efficient action, by the enmity with which state patronage has surrounded it, but should you now organize a missionary system for the whole island, and all your English brethren to your aid so that the Gospel may be heard in every village, not only in your churches to which the Catholics will not come, but to wherever they may be gathered to listen; the truths of the Gospel, unchecked in their influence by the bitterness . . . generated among the peasantry, may effect a religious change in Ireland . . ."13

The missioning emphasis of Noel's theology was forced to turn to the forces of organized nonconformity for expression. From the early days of his London ministry he had been closely associated with evangelical nonconformity and its far-flung missionary interests. Under the auspices of the Evangelical Society he undertook a trip to France in 1846 to visit its mission stations. Noel was also instrumental in the founding of the Evangelical Alliance. His drift from the establishment, in one sense, began on the day that he inherited the rich traditions of St. John's Chapel and did not end until after his resignation in December of 1848. *The Baptist Magazine* in May of 1849 claimed that Noel's secession had cost him a bishop's chair. This observation based solely on his aristocratic heritage did not take into account the scope of his activities within the church. The Evangelicals in 1832 had only one man in the House of Bishops that could be described as sympathetic to their theological position. There is little question in this writer's mind that Noel had so completely cut the political ground from beneath his feet that, notwithstanding his being a Queen's chaplain, he had no chance for the coveted mitre.<sup>14</sup>

A brief two weeks (December 14th) after his resignation, Noel put into the hands of James Nisbet, a London publisher, the preface for a book entitled *Essay on the Union of Church and State*. This book was to be a definitive statement on the reasons for his secession. This was the answer that the people who swelled his congregation on November 28th had expected.<sup>15</sup> The preface began: "As . . . I have frankly attacked the Union between Church and State, I feel constrained to bear my humble testimony to the piety and worth of many who uphold it." He pointedly defends the spiritual character of priest, layman, and prelate and yet obviously feels that only the evangelical churchman possesses the necessary quality of piety. A clear dichotomy is drawn between the evangelical and the non-evangelical clergy; ". . . between those who preach the Gospel and those who do not preach it."<sup>16</sup>

Within Noel's biblically-oriented concept of the church he emphasized that it can be constituted only by a group of believers. "Statesmanship no more qualifies to direct the affairs of a Church, then piety qualifies to direct the affairs of a nation. Let each keep to its own sphere of action."<sup>17</sup> He indicated that though a proposal to change the rubrics may in itself be valuable, those in whose hands such a revision was to be done were not qualified. The members of Parliament involved might be men of high principle or no principle—Roman Catholic, Anglo-Catholic, Deist, Socinian, Swedenborgians or Quakers: "They may be religious or profane, young men of gaiety and fashion or old men of inveterate immorality; they may be wealthy or steeped in debt; absolutists sighing for the resurrection of Laud and Strafford, or democrats, who in their dreams see bright visions of republicanism; they may be sportsmen, who are ever foremost at the death of the fox, or keener civic hunters after gold; they may be lovers of pleasure, whose employments are seldom more serious than the opera, and who enter the House of Commons for amusement." And shall this be the council that sits in judgment upon the church of Christ?

The copy of the *Essay* housed by the British Museum provides us with the response of a contemporary churchman to the above argument. He, in a scribbled margin note, writes "i.e. to allow the 'Evangelical' clergy (no more despotic animals in existence) to have their own way." This response to Noel's plea for the ending of secular interference is passionately underlined.<sup>18</sup>

Using the Bible as the rule of faith, the essay demands the dissolution of the union between church and state because ". . . the actual state is irreligious" and there is no scriptural basis for such a union. The argument moves through Mosaic law, prophecy and the New Testament, in each instance supporting the author's claims for disestablishment. "By the Union an irreligious govern-

ment binds the churches hand and foot, rules over them with a rod of iron, will allow no self-government, no reformation, no independent discipline, and is their absolute, irresponsible Lord." Each Christian church should maintain its own pastor on the New Testament model and in the event that poverty prevents this ideal, then other churches should freely support the work.

Noel used his favourite literary weapon of ridicule to pan the Parliament's right to ". . . determine how many successors of apostles there shall be." A minister much less a bishop should never be imposed upon a congregation. The church must maintain its right to the exercise of patronage. In concluding the first half of his essay, which is primarily concerned with political factors, he points to the symptomatic evil of the church rate and tithe. Though he offers nothing new from the cries of distaste that had been coming from Dissent there is a great deal of significance in the similarity of expression. His first set of conclusions reveal the four main principles which served, in his opinion, to buttress the union: ". . . the legal maintenance of the pastors . . . a selfish and covetous disregard of positive duty . . . the supremacy of the State . . . infidelity to Christ, their King and Head." The situation produced patronage ". . . which is destructive to their spiritual welfare." It also "renders them schismatical towards their dissenting brethren and uncharitable to every other recusant. All these four principles are unscriptural, corrupt, and noxious; and by placing the churches of Christ under the influence of men of the world, hinder their free action, destroy their spirituality, and perpetuate their corruptions."<sup>20</sup>

Obviously much of the passion with which this man wrote was produced by the frustration that he met while trying to serve his Christian calling according to his evangelical bent. The claim is made, with wearisome repetition, that only the evangelical churchman is worthy of the cloth that he wears. At one point Noel estimated that only ten per cent of the clergy did their job according to their calling and the rest according to the law.<sup>21</sup>

"The evangelical minister of an Anglican church is . . . placed in a miserable position. He must not preach Christ in private houses, nor enter into any neighbouring parish where an ungodly minister is leading the people to destruction; he must baptize the infants of ungodly persons; he must teach his parishioners, against all observation, that these infants are members of Christ, children of God, and inheritors of the Kingdom of heaven; he must take unregenerate young persons at the age of fifteen or sixteen to be pronounced regenerate by the bishop; he must admit all sorts of persons to the Lord's table, though they are not invited by Christ, and must finally, when they die, express his thanks to God



that they are taken to glory, when he has every reason to think that they are lost for ever."<sup>22</sup>

Although Noel's prose tends to be verbose it nevertheless overcomes this overt weakness with a vigorous style that never allows the reader to forget that a crucial issue is before him. The issue for Noel is not merely a political juncture or liaison between the church of Christ and an ungodly national government. The supreme moment of truth for this renegade Anglican is the realization that the union destroys the church's ability to fully preach the Gospel and live the *evangel*. The only solution was a spiritual revival that will destroy the union and bring rebirth to the national church.

"No religious cause requires irreligious means for its advancement. Let us disgrace ourselves by no railing, condemn all personal invective, and be guilty of no exaggeration, for these are the weapons of the weak and the unprincipled; but uniting with all those who love the Redeemer, let us recognize with gratitude every work of the Spirit within the Establishment as well as without it."<sup>23</sup> The above was written by a man who, though filled with passion against a foe, recognized that not all men stood under his condemnation and that there were many of his party who saw fit to remain within the frustrations of the church. Noel continually strove to maintain close ties with these men and to do all that was possible to prevent their alienation from Nonconformity during the latter agitation for disestablishment.<sup>24</sup>

Noel's call for the disestablishment of the Church of England was closely related to his earlier demands for ending the fiasco-laden situation of the Irish Church. Yet in the midst of men who were calling for force to end the union he consistently maintained a line devoted solely to argument and persuasion, denying both the use of physical force and political action. He steadfastly refused to join the Liberation Society or to appear on its platform. However, excerpts of his many writings, particularly the *Essay on the Union of Church and State*, appeared in the publications of the Liberation Society.

One area in which his thinking on the English scene was divergent from his former opinion of the Irish problem, concerned the vast properties of the English establishment. In the early 1840's he had advocated that the Irish church be disendowed as well as disestablished; in the *Essay* however he maintained that the English church should not face disendowment.

Although Noel's mind was firmly resolved to leaving the Establishment it would seem that his plans for the future were undetermined. For some time he seemingly faltered in what appeared to be an inevitable course towards dissent. After leaving his own pulpit he attended the parish church at Hornsey for some time. Then

on March 25th, 1849, he preached at the Scottish church in Regent Square. This was his initial venture into a pulpit outside of the church. Later he took the oaths of 52 George III formalizing his status as a dissenting minister, and during the month of May he preached in the Weigh House Chapel. His return to Bedford Row was cause for comment for on August 9th he was rebaptized by immersion at the John Street Baptist Chapel (virtually next door to St. John's Chapel). Called to serve this chapel in the following September he remained with its congregation until his retirement in 1868. A man whose leadership had already been recognized by one communion was welcomed with open arms by the Baptist Union of Great Britain whom he served as President in 1855 and 1867.

Unpopular causes seemed to lie at the very centre of his life. A total abstainer, he was a prominent advocate of the Temperance Movement during a time when a dry Baptist (or Nonconformist for that matter) was as rare as a unicorn. In one of Noel's rare political appearances, Joseph Parker writes of his speaking at Manchester's Free Trade Hall in defence of the North in 1863 during the American Civil War. He spoke, said Parker, "... in his own plaintive and gentle way."<sup>25</sup>

One of Noel's most satisfying experiences was participating in the Sunday evening services which were conducted at Exeter Hall, and supported by the last of the prominent Evangelical churchmen, Lord Shaftesbury. When the parish incumbent forced an end to this attempt to reach the unconverted masses of London it fortified his scepticism towards the church he felt compelled to leave. After a long illness Baptist Wriothesley Noel died at Stanmore, Middlesex, on January 19th, 1873.

Too often the historian exercising his prerogative of hindsight, tends to minimize the courage of his historical predecessors. Although Noel will never be able to muster the impact of Cardinal Newman upon the nation's history it required the same cut of courage to be a dissenter. These words of Thomas Price are flowery in good nineteenth century style and yet valuable because they give us the opinion of a contemporary of this very unusual man: "... though the days of martyrs and confessors have passed away for ever, the course he has adopted in relinquishing those prospects, to which his birth, his attainments, and his character, entitled him, brings his orbit far within the circumference of their undying glory."<sup>26</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The Times*, London, November 28th, 1848, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, November 30th, 1848, p. 3; December 1st, p. 5. Although there is no direct evidence with regard to the Wednesday evening meeting it would appear that Noel announced only his intent and did not set a date for the occurrence.

<sup>3</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. xli. NOEL, BAPTIST WRIOTHESLEY. This article is inaccurate in attributing the secession of Noel to the Gorham Case.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *State of the Metropolis considered in a letter to the Lord Bishop of London*, 2nd ed. 1835, B. W. Noel.

<sup>6</sup> *The Eclectic Review*, T. Price, ed., London, October, 1842, p. 491.

<sup>7</sup> *A Plea for the Poor*, showing how the existing Corn Laws will affect the interests of the Working Classes. B. W. Noel, London, 24 pp.

<sup>8</sup> *The Quarterly Review*, July and Sept. 1841, London, pp. 504-5.

<sup>9</sup> *The Eclectic Review*, August, 1845, p. 312.

<sup>10</sup> *The Catholic Claims*, B. W. Noel, 2nd ed., London, Nisbet, pp. 25-26.

<sup>11</sup> *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 14-16.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 46ff.

<sup>14</sup> *The Baptist Magazine*, May, 1849, London, p. 24.

<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately copies of this *magnum opus* are rare items and when one does appear on a bookseller's list its value is unrecognized by the two shillings asked for it.

<sup>16</sup> *Essay on the Union of Church and State*, B. W. Noel, 2nd ed., London, Nisbet, 1849 (604 pp.).

<sup>17</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 239ff.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 468-9.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 604.

<sup>24</sup> He publicly attacked Spurgeon's sermon on Baptismal Regeneration for this specific reason. Cf. A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, London, Kingsgate, 1956, p. 237.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Parker, *A Preacher's Life*, p. 396.

<sup>26</sup> *Eclectic Review*, December, 1849, p. 664.

KENNETH RICHARD SHORT

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## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, 1963

We are glad to announce that the special speaker is to be Dr. Robert T. Handy, Professor of Church History at Union Theological Seminary, New York. Dr. Handy is an associate editor of *Foundations*, the journal of history and theology published by the American Baptist Historical Society. As previously announced the meeting will be held in the Institute Hall of Westminster Chapel on Monday, 29th April. It will commence at 4.30 p.m. and will be preceded by tea.