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EDITORIAL

What is England? This is, of course, a parochial question, for despite the arrogant assumption that being Welsh, Scottish or Northern Irish is simply a quaint gloss on being English, England is but one part of this diverse group of peoples known as the United Kingdom. But if the question is about the nature of English society, no question is more urgent for the English themselves at this present time, against a background of economic decline, urban unrest and political uncertainty. It should be an obvious question for the Christian communities of this country, not least those of us in the nonconformist tradition. We are not slow to point out the ways in which historic dissent has helped to shape a society valuing freedom of conscience and equality of opportunity, a society open to criticism of privilege and tradition regarded as ends in themselves. Yet, disturbingly, relatively little has been forthcoming of late from our own quarters in the way of analysis of English society, past and present. A thoughtful exception was, of course, Daniel Jenkins's *The British, Their Identity and Their*

"Editorial," Baptist Quarterly 29.5 (January 1982): 191-193.

Religion (SCM Press, 1975). An observer may be forgiven for judging that instead of being really concerned with the national scene, the Free Churches are more interested in surviving within it; or, if jogged by conscience into a measure of "social concern", fastening upon certain needs as "areas of witness" rather than examining how those needs arise. Does this correspond in spirit to the vision of seventeenth and eighteenth century dissent, or even that of John Clifford?

In fact, there is a good deal of social and cultural history being written, which should attract the historically-minded nonconformist to a debate. Two recent books, of vastly differing interest and attitude, may be cited. The first is by Maurice Cowling of Cambridge, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England* (CUP, 1980). The author intends this to be the preliminary to a series of volumes exploring the nature of the English body politic from a traditionalist, constitutional Anglican standpoint. It consists of a survey of the thinkers and teachers whom the author deems to have been specially significant in the development of his own thought. Some are household names (in academic households, at any rate), while others will be beyond the ken of those who were not reading English or History at Cambridge before, and shortly after, the last war. Edward Norman and Enoch Powell bring us, or Professor Cowling at least, to the present day. Exactly what is in store for us in the series to come is not clear, but evidently there will be a considered argument for a stable structure of society, with the national Church as the necessary embodiment of traditional and distinctively Christian values.

The assumption lying beneath such a well-trodden path is the primacy of continuity over change, of tradition over innovation, whether in Church or society. This is often taken to be the distinctively "English" ethos, and often admiringly so both by the English and foreigners. But it is an ethos sharply examined in the second book, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980*, by Professor Martin J. Wiener of Rice University (CUP 1980). Wiener's thesis is that the roots of contemporary economic decline lie deep within English cultural attitudes which have been at work ever since the industrial revolution itself began. While Britain led the world into the industrial age, her ruling élites never wholly committed themselves to industrial expansion as a worthy end, and, progressively throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, affected to despise it. Moreover, many of the industrial pioneers themselves, once they had reached a certain level of material security, detached themselves from the venturesome world of commerce and applied science, and adopted the attitudes and pursuits of the supposedly ideal English gentleman. Political leaders of all parties, literary figures, public schools, social thinkers of the Anglican Church - all are found guilty by Professor Wiener of effectively despising manufacturing trade and industry in the interests of "higher values", the "real England" of rural peace and quiet. For several generations now, Englishmen have put security before experiment, so that now we have a society effectively in retirement, unable

or unwilling to break out of inherited patterns of class and working life. We are not creating wealth, because we do not really believe it is worth the cost to the ordered tranquillity of our green and pleasant land.

To those with a nonconformist prejudice, Cowling's approach begs many obvious questions, while those with a nose for history may wish that Wiener had probed much further into religious attitudes than the utterances of COPEC writers and Anglican theorists. The role of dissenters in early industrialisation is surely too important to ignore. Apart from a reference to documented cases of newly-rich nonconformists joining the Church of England, Wiener does largely ignore them. But if a major cause of our present malaise is a lack of the questioning, innovatory spirit, which originally owed much to the nonconformist mind, there is surely a need to trace the relationships between the changing fortunes of this religious tradition and those of the wider society. Maybe only nonconformist historians will be sufficiently interested to pursue this.

It is not a distant step from these large considerations to an item in this issue of the *Quarterly* which will be appreciated by many who have been associated with the Baptist Historical Society over the years. In the last issue, we were able to pay only the briefest of tributes to the late Mr Charles Jewson, a Vice-President of the Society. Here, we are privileged to make available the memorial address given by his son, Mr William Jewson, in St Mary's Baptist Church, Norwich. This will be cherished not simply because of Charles Jewson's standing in our Society, but also on account of its vivid and moving portraiture of a man shaped in, but in no wise cramped by, his Free Church tradition: rooted in his local church, and equally in his city; of elemental faith, yet drawing upon the spirituality of many ages and Christian traditions; deeply concerned with the issues of today's world, yet content to work in his own particular place; and moreover - readers of Wiener please note - a man who consciously and deliberately chose to be a merchant when ability and inclination might well have led him in a "higher" direction.