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NONCONFORMITY AND CONFORMITY

The language of nonconformity and dissent presupposes some consistency in that which conscience diverges. Munson's study of *The Nonconformists* [SPCK, 1991, 360pp, £17.50] overtly covers a relatively short period, 1890-1914, in which they began to come to terms with living more easily both with church and society, but this is well contexted by extensive archaeology in the Victorian period. Those two decades witnessed historic religious nonconformity becoming more socially conformist: its patrician members increasingly encountered the problems of new wealth, whilst its several denominations had a problem in sustaining any plebeian presence at all. After a century of growth, nonconformists achieved their highest density within the nation in the first decade of the twentieth century. At some four and a half million, they achieved a community strength of approximately 15% of the population, but already with indications of a problematic future. Nonconformity's presence in London, for example, had been saved by the Baptists, and largely by the Spurgeonian factor. The new Nonconformist plutocracy was an inter-related clan of merchant princes, amongst whom were relatively few Baptists. Reaching both rural and urban poor proved increasingly difficult; by 1900 it was claimed

that 67% of Baptists lived in towns, with a bias towards small and medium-sized towns and to the artisan and lower middle-classes, with Spurgeon's tabernacles maintaining a presence in the less affluent suburbs, though not in touch with the great mass of the poor. The institutional churches of Meyer, Clifford and Carlile sought a comprehensive engagement with working-class culture.

Nonconformity, increasingly united both in spirit and in organization, cultivated dignity and order both in architecture and in conduct of its services. The robust, mid-century rhetoric may have provoked a reaction, but the process was not without risk when affluent benefactors and those they employed were not well-versed in the puritan and evangelical inheritance of dissent. Nonconformists made a decided impact upon popular culture through journalism, novel-writing, circulating libraries and mutual improvement societies that busied themselves with early adult education. In a world of improved communications, nonconformists became increasingly aware of their strength overseas, particularly in the USA and the white dominions. The exposure of leading nonconformists to the overseas lecture circuit led to the impact of North American revivalists on the British scene.

But the tide was turning: ennobled dissenters begot establishment children, and ex-dissenting novelists made at best wistful, but all-too-often quite sour comments. As among the evangelicals of the 1830s, there was a 'parting of friends'. That same sense of cultural watershed is present in dissenters' access to the ancient universities, at once a point of arrival and departure, as T.H. Green made clear. To talk of nonconformists 'using' London University is to undervalue an institution in whose foundation they had played a formative part: they were also critical actors in securing the opening up of its examinations to external students, who might have been set in the path of higher education by another nonconformist initiative, Cassell's Popular Education.

There was much to encourage but also aspects of experience that were decidedly ambiguous. Issues of conscience had enticed the nonconformists into politics where they came to command an important sector of the Liberal vote, though this was under threat in a world of increased affluence, fission within liberal ranks, and the emergence of Labour as a third option. The nonconformists never secured from the Liberal Party due reward for the support they provided as, in Rosebery's words, 'the motive force of provincial Liberalism'. Although not altogether happy with the 1870 compromise over education, full nonconformist fury was provoked by Balfour's 1902 Education Act, which offered rate support for denominational schools - 'Rome on the Rates'. Munson argues that by 1902 the implementation of the 1870 Act 'had established a new and alternative form of religion, "non-denominationalism"'. Late Victorian nonconformists, deserting an earlier voluntarism, had become committed to this revision of the state's religious outlook, leaving the voluntary mantle to be taken up, so far as education was concerned, by Anglicans and Roman Catholics. Meanwhile Nonconformity committed itself to Passive Resistance to the Tory legislation by withholding rates, action advised by Baptist and Congregational Unions' assembly resolutions, and by the Primitive Methodists. Up to 10,000 (less than 0.5%) responded, but many of those suffered distraint of goods, whilst others were struck off the electoral roll. Almost 200, with no goods to distraint, suffered imprisonment. In the event the iron law of economics

achieved more than the Passive Resisters in moving the administration of education from the church to democratically elected local councils, at a time when nonconformist political allegiance became divided.

Dissenting Thought and the Life of the Churches [Mellen Research University Press, 1990, 713pp, \$119.95] contains twenty-two essays by Alan Sell, recently returned to Britain as Professor of Christian Doctrine at Aberystwyth. His inaugural, *Conservation and Exploration in Christian Theology*, [Aberystwyth and Lampeter University School of Theology, 1992, 23pp, £1.75.] is a typically trenchant defence of both actions. His collected articles, spanning 1973-1990, represent a sympathetic attempt to analyze the thought, church life, and interactions of the dissenting tradition, as it develops from the violence and sectarianism of the seventeenth century into the more irenic ecumenical climates of the late twentieth century.

David Bebbington's *Victorian Nonconformity* [Headstart History Papers, 1992, 84pp, £4.25] interprets recent scholarship for the general reader. He begins by identifying the players, helpfully rejecting A. D. Gilbert's idiosyncratic usage of the term 'New Dissent' to embrace all groups influenced by the Evangelical Revival, including reawakened Baptists and Congregationalists. Instead he reasserts the traditional distinction between Old [Puritan-founded] Dissent, and New Dissent born out of the Evangelical Revival. The distinction between Evangelical and Rational Dissent is further elaborated, as is the distinction between the original Wesleyan Connexion and Methodism's own dissenting bodies. Special attention is given to the Helmstadter thesis: that 'chapels passed through an epoch of confident individualism lasting from the 1830s to the 1880s before turning at the end of the century towards new attitudes that undermined their optimism and even their viability.' Helmstadter says Nonconformity grew in a period in which theology, society and politics all exhorted the individual, and so was vulnerable to a new age of collectivism, the social gospel and Biblical Criticism. Whilst admitting the strength of individualism in nonconformist thought and practice, Bebbington argues that it neglects other factors, such as the importance of the family, the chapel community and philanthropic concern. A widespread 'spirit of mutuality' encouraged nonconformist involvement in trade unions, whilst the concept of national righteousness empowered the state to work to that end both within the nation and in the wider world of Empire. Bebbington points out the ambiguity of Evangelicalism: 'it called for souls to be saved one by one, and yet held up standards of a just society that could be imposed only at the expense of individual freedom'. Within Free-church polity at its best, congregationalism was always balanced by the principle of association. In this century Bebbington sees the decline of the inter-war years 'reinvigorated successively by Pentecostals, charismatics within the denominations, and house churches in parallel with them'. That invites the question R.W Dale posed of those earlier Evangelicals who became dissenters 'by accident' rather than principle: to what extent does this wider nonconformity uphold the principles of historic Free Churchmanship? Again a changed context has to be acknowledged when so many loyal Anglican voices are questioning the principles of establishment within a church which after the decision to ordain women is likely to be shorn of those voices least inclined to extend ecumenical relationships in the direction of other protestant churches.