

profound Evangelical insight, and they help to show how the Gospel Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is the norm of worship in spirit and truth.

On Writing the History of the Evangelical Revival*

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THE need for a full-scale history of the evangelical movement has long been apparent, and in recent years increasingly recognized. It has been a weakness, characteristic of the evangelicalism of the first half of the twentieth century—if the work was to be done by those most likely to take it up—that this task has remained until now unattempted. The fact is that true evangelical fervour and the habit of mind of the historian do not, as a rule, go hand in hand. With some exceptions, as far as the study of history is concerned, the traditional, conservative evangelicals have often been too busy to ponder. With about an equal number of exceptions, the liberals have been, almost by definition, suspicious of anything which savoured of antiquarianism. But in the more robust days of the eighteenth century, we had the church histories of Joseph Milner and Thomas Haweis, and in the earlier nineteenth century, when evangelicalism had not yet reached its zenith, the *Ecclesiastical Memoir* of J. W. Middelton. Later we come upon the painstaking work of Charles Hole, sometime lecturer in ecclesiastical history at King's College, London, the worth of which, to the discriminating student, can scarcely be overestimated. These men recognized the value of recording the manner of the Holy Spirit's working through the centuries, and even in the details of the comparatively recent past. In this they were truly anglican. But in the succeeding age, of thoroughly scientific history, the evangelicals have relatively little to show, even in regard to their own development. With the increase of pietist ways of thought, and the consequent decline of learning among more conservative evangelicals, the study of non-Biblical history was one of the first casualties. Hitherto the general reader has had to rely chiefly on Balleine's excellent account, *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England*, which, though still in print, was first published over forty years ago. This book has been fairly widely read outside evangelical circles. But as far as a more learned survey is concerned, the nearest approaches have been made by historians of other schools of thought, some of whom (though this is not true of the author of that landmark in evangelical historical studies, Canon C. H. E. Smyth's *Simeon and Church Order*,

* *The Early Evangelicals: A Religious and Social Study*. By L. E. Elliott-Binns. 1953. Lutterworth Press. p. 464. 31/6.

published in 1940) have not unnaturally shown a tendency to repeat the *dicta* of such quasi-historical works as Church's *Oxford Movement*.¹ Here we are near the heart of a serious, practical matter. The history of anglo-catholicism and of other manifestations of unreformed religion in the Church of England, in all their aspects, has been the subject of a continual flow of historical literature. By these the church, and indirectly the evangelical position, have been judged overmuch. To their cost have the evangelicals neglected that for which they had little inclination, and often, it must be admitted, little ability. Yet the material for writing a history of evangelicalism is abundant. The numerous lives of notable evangelicals, a by-product of the biographical zeal of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, afford a ready illustration of this. From the days of Middleton's *Biographia Evangelica*, there have not been wanting a supply of purchasers of edifying biographies, and we may thank God for it in more senses than one. But the writers of religious biography have rarely seen as a whole the history of the movements which their heroes represented. Thus it is necessary to collate, as well as to sift, the historical evidence which is contained in these multitudinous sources. This is Dr. Elliott-Binns' strong point in his recently published account of *The Early Evangelicals*. He has combed (if not always with a very fine comb) many of the pages of evangelical biography and published journals. The appearance therefore of a history of the evangelical movement in the eighteenth century, based on such material, extending over four hundred and fifty pages, the product of a well-known writer, must be regarded as of the first importance to readers of *The Churchman*, and justifies a somewhat lengthy discussion. Whether the time is even yet ripe to write a definitive book on this subject must be a matter of opinion. Dr. Elliott-Binns, in his *Preface*, apparently claims, as far as the early period is concerned, to have done it. This period, we learn on investigation (not from the title page, but by reference to a footnote) ends at 1789.

The Doctor, whose treatise has a sub-title, '*A Religious and Social Study*', first devotes over a hundred pages to an interesting treatment of the background of the revival. This is useful, and indeed essential to any serious study. The ground has not been covered so comprehensively from this point of view before. Furthermore, the author's comments, for instance on the 'entertainment value' of the early evangelism (p. 13), are often sensible. But we are not now primarily concerned to measure the depths of this portion of the book. In a chapter devoted to *Literature and Art*, however, it is surprising to find no reference to John Russell, a well-known painter of charming portraits, who was nevertheless a militant evangelical, or to John Bacon, the eminent sculptor, who was one of the founders of the Church Missionary Society. Nor is the existence of these gentlemen noticed, where it might have been, at p. 434, in the chapter on *The Evangelical Achievement*. The Army and Navy, and especially evangelical representation in them, in the persons, for example, of Colonel Gardiner of the '45, at one end of the period, or of Admirals Lords Barham and Gambier (as they were latterly known), at the

¹ It is only fair to recall that Dean Church himself disclaimed the character of an historian of the tractarian movement.

other, are entirely omitted. So too, we are led to suppose, are other notable laymen, until we reach some of them in the concluding chapter, where their presence seems to suggest that their inclusion was an after-thought.

The second hundred pages or so treat with undoubted ability of the pioneers, the growth of opposition, the separations, and the Calvinist controversy. A work of this kind, containing a multitude of facts, almost inevitably includes small errors, most of which may be passed over. But in these chapters we begin to sense more serious deficiencies. We may excuse a set of obviously incorrect dates in connection with Lady Huntingdon (p. 135), and numerous minor factual mistakes, a quotation which supports an opposite contention (p. 190), some minor misquotations (pp. 124, 132), and even the omission of quotation marks (p. 156) ; such discrepancies may be found throughout the book ; but ought the historian of the Early Evangelicals to imply acquiescence in the well-worn fallacy, though popularized by Bishop Ryle, that Whitefield (p. 125) was of humble birth ? And for that matter should he shew himself so unfamiliar with the descent of the Stillingfleet family as hopelessly to confuse the relationships of the two James's and the two Edwards ? (See pp. 293-4, 314.) Edward Stillingfleet of West Bromwich was the brother, not the son, of James of Hotham, and his colleague at Oxford was Wadham. It was his nephew, Edward William Stillingfleet, who was a fellow of Lincoln, but after Dr. Elliott-Binns' period. James of Hotham was a *great*-grandson of Bishop Stillingfleet of Worcester, and James Stillingfleet, fellow of Merton, was his cousin, not his nephew.

It is in the next section, of about a hundred and thirty pages, wherein Dr. Elliott-Binns attempts a record of the expansion of evangelical beliefs (in England : Wales is omitted), county by county and parish by parish, that we see plainly how superficial his investigations have been. In Surrey, we are told, evangelical views " seem not to have penetrated at all ". Yet Dr. Peers, one of the founders of the Church Missionary Society, to whom Dr. Elliott-Binns refers on p. 289 in his capacity as rector of Ickleford, Hertfordshire, was appointed rector of Morden in 1778. In the previous year, Isaac Lefroy had become non-resident rector of Compton. We may notice a few other omissions at random. In Kent, for example, Andrews, who on p. 332 is referred to as vicar of Stinchcombe, Gloucestershire, was from 1767 vicar of Marden. At Beckenham, William Rose was rector from 1776. Dr. Elliott-Binns makes extensive use of John Wesley's *Journal*, and speaks of him as visiting Romsey. But he does not allude to Daniel Williams, curate and vicar there from 1774 to 1833, though he might easily have found an account of him in Hole's *Early History of the Church Missionary Society*. In fact " the only definitely evangelical parish " which the Doctor can trace in Hampshire is Kinchin's Dummer. Whereas he had to look no further from the neighbourhood of Basingstoke than the parish of Ashe to discover Isaac Lefroy again, as resident rector from 1777. All these men continued in their incumbencies until after 1789. Examples of this sort could be multiplied. Dr. Elliott-Binns may well aver that to bring more facts to light was one of the things he hoped for in writing this book. But such omissions are damaging to

any claim to have produced a definitive history. It would seem almost too unkind to point out that Dr. Elliott-Binns has, to some extent, made up for his losses by inventing a fictitious evangelical. Yet such is, in fact, the case. On p. 266 we are confronted with a curate to Joseph Jane at St. Mary Magdalene, Oxford, whose existence is otherwise confined to the imagination of the proof-reader of Sidney's *Life of Sir Richard Hill*, who mistook "Jane's" for "Jones". This brings us to a chapter on *Evangelicalism in the Universities*. It is hardly for the present writer to pass judgment on Dr. Elliott-Binns's treatment of the situation at Oxford. In accepting the hitherto generally acknowledged belief that, as Balleine says, "Foiled at Oxford, the Evangelical leaders turned to Cambridge", he is doing no worse than keeping his place in a long line of respectable historians. But for some less understandable reason he fails to pick up the thread at 1783, when St. Edmund Hall started on its career as an evangelical stronghold, with the appointment of Isaac Crouch as vice-principal.

It becomes increasingly evident that Dr. Elliott-Binns is not intimately acquainted with every aspect of his subject. Indeed, he does not seem to have been aware of the existence of important sources. It is apparent, to take only one example, that among printed books he has made no use of the varied information to be found in the three-volume biography of Thomas Charles of Bala, whose early ministry was passed as an anglican clergyman, published in 1908. And as for manuscripts, no attempt is made to use even the better-known ones, such as the *Venn Papers*, let alone to ferret out others. (Nor will anyone in future be able to afford to neglect the large accumulation of material discovered fairly recently at the Church Missionary House, representing the life-work of Charles Hole.) It may justly be said that this would be an enormous task. But it is part of the work of the historian, and a most important one in a relatively virgin field. There is another type of source, considerably easier of access, which Dr. Elliott-Binns has ignored. Much modern biographical material has never passed beyond the stage of typescript, which is a sad fact not due to its being unprintable, but to its lack of commercial value. A great deal of this would have been pertinent to Dr. Elliott-Binns's labours. A thesis by Dr. Skevington Wood on Thomas Haweis comes under this heading, to say nothing of scholarly accounts of other early evangelicals either completed of late years or still in the process of composition. This raises the whole question of whether the time has yet come when an attempt to write such a book as Dr. Elliott-Binns's can profitably be made. The whole field of evangelical history was until recently comparatively unworked. Books based on careful research, such as Dr. Davies' *Early Cornish Evangelicals* (1951), are slowly being published, covering the ground inch by inch. It seems doubtful whether a definitive history of the movement can be written until it is possible to collate all the facts, and to assess all the evidence, from a whole series of topographical, biographical, and other 'sectional' studies. It is true that in this respect the eighteenth century is better off than the nineteenth. But much remains to be done.

Dr. Elliott-Binns has further chapters on *Evangelical Methods, Doctrines, and Literature*. These again are characterized by good sense

(cp. his remarks on the treatment of children, pp. 375-6), rather than by exhaustive study. The discussion of distinctively evangelical doctrines reveals the author as standing in the liberal tradition. This, however, makes his sympathetic treatment of the movement as a whole all the more commendable. And he does not shrink from acknowledging that the early evangelicals were as deeply committed to the doctrine of Biblical infallibility, as indeed constituting an important element in their success, as are many of their spiritual descendants.

The book suffers somewhat from minor idiosyncrasies and blemishes. The endings of all the footnotes have been deprived of full stops. At times the Doctor lapses shamelessly into colloquialisms—under bibliographical Abbreviations (“blurb”); and on pp. 21 (“scotched”), 203 (“knock-out”), 309 (“peevd”). The index is far from adequate for a work of this size. Michell of Veryan, who is mentioned on pp. 344 (as Mitchell) and 351, is not the only omission from it.

It is difficult not to feel that Dr. Elliott-Binns' book falls between two stools. It cannot give satisfaction to scholars; and its length is likely to prove intimidating to the general reader, who will also look askance at the price. Dr. Elliott-Binns has, in fact, applied on a larger scale, but with even more limited success, the method of Canon Loane, whose books on the 'Evangelical Succession' at Oxford and Cambridge were also published by the Lutterworth Press. No historian, however, can possibly be ungrateful for the amount of work which has evidently been devoted to making available an interesting account of the early evangelicals. If this has been done chiefly from readily available sources, with most of which he is already familiar, it is not to be despised. In these days anything which reminds us effectively of the anglican heritage of the eighteenth century revival, with its essential basis firmly protestant and truly catholic, is to be given a welcome. Nevertheless, as a writer in *The Times Literary Supplement* for June 1948, quoted by Dr. Elliott-Binns in his *Preface*, justly said: “The history of the Evangelical revival in the Church of England has yet to be written”. This assertion remains fundamentally true.
