

EARLY EVANGELICAL FICTION

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MR. NEWELL, a member of the staff of Liverpool University Library, is known to our readers as a frequent contributor to our review pages, especially when works dealing with English literature come up for notice. This study of the works of Hannah More will be followed by a concluding instalment dealing with Legh Richmond, Rowland Hill and Mrs. Sherwood.

CHRISTIANS holding evangelical views have rarely even approached the first rank of English writers. Once you have disqualified Milton for his suspect theology there remains only Bunyan. The reason is not difficult to discover: if an evangelical Christian can write he has something more important to convey than mere imaginative fiction, whether it be in prose or in verse; nor does he care to disturb his conscience, defile his mind, and waste his time by reading other men's secular fiction. What has Christ to do with Apollo? *Quid Hirieldus cum Christo?* This is not the place to follow the historical development of Christian antipathy to secular literature; it is sufficient to state that the ascetic tradition is very powerful and no doubt always will be.

There are two lines of English fiction, to borrow Dr. Kettle's useful dichotomy.¹ One seeks to render life without imposing on its representation any conscious pattern; its early practitioners are Nashe, Defoe and Smollett. The other springs from the Biblical parables and the popular dramas and sermons of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and "its pattern derives from and illustrates some kind of generalized moral concept or attitude".² The allegorical Bunyan occupies a very important position in this second line. The later evangelical authors to be considered are also to be found in this tradition of the "moral fable". Like Bunyan, they use their creative powers to produce fiction illustrative of their conception of Christian truth; unlike Bunyan, they fail to transmute their material into great literature. The disability, seemingly inherent in orthodox Protestantism, which made the Puritans, in the age of Shakespeare, Donne and Herbert, write devotional and controversial prose, stifled their spiritual descendants as well. Learned

¹ A. Kettle, *An Introduction to the English Novel* (London, 1954) I, p. 21.

² *Ibid.*

as they often were, sometimes genuinely appreciative of the pagan classics and contemporary polite letters, they were unable, on the whole, to divert their literary energies into imaginative channels. When they did so it was to write hymns or moral fables.

The great flowering of evangelical creative writing falls between 1789 and 1818. During this period were published the evangelical best-sellers, which set the pattern for subsequent Christian fiction: Hannah More's Cheap Repository Tracts and *Coelebs*, Legh Richmond's *The Dairyman's Daughter*, Rowland Hill's *Village Dialogues* and Mrs. Sherwood's *The Fairchild Family*. Evangelical fiction developed and spread, but it became standardized. Mrs. Sherwood published almost until her death in 1851. Charlotte Elizabeth Browne Phelan Tonna wrote tales annually from 1825 until she died in 1846. Other evangelical fiction included, for example, the Rev. J. W. Cunningham's *The Velvet Cushion* (1816), and the Rev. C. B. Tayler's *Margaret*, Lady Catherine Long's *Sir Roland Ashton* and Ann Howard's *Mary Spencer*, which were all published in 1844. The Rev. W. F. Wilkinson produced *The Rector in Search of a Curate* in 1843 and *The Parish Rescued* two years later. *Steepleton, or High Church and Low Church* by the Rev. S. Jenner came out in 1847. Ann Flinders's *Felix de Lisle* (1840) and Jean Ingelow's *Allerton and Dreux* (1851) are said to contain the "only two genuinely likable heroes in all the Evangelical fiction of this period".³ Lady Caroline Lucy Scott's *The Old Grey Church* inspired George Eliot's article on "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" in the *Westminster Review* for October 1856.^{3a} Fanny Mayne wrote *Jane Rutherford, or the Miner's Strike* in 1854. Emma Jane Worboise (Mrs. Guyton) produced nearly fifty novels from the fifties onwards. Dissenters frowned on fiction and read tracts and sermons instead, and novels by Free Churchmen do not appear until later. Pious periodicals offered a continuous diet of healthy moral tales. And, of course, there was a tradition of godly children's books, including both the anti-evangelical Mrs. Sarah Trimmer's famous *Fabulous Histories, Designed for the Instruction of Children Respecting their Treatment of Animals* (1786) and the evangelical Mrs. Sherwood, who mentions the earlier book approvingly in her even more celebrated work.

The four evangelical authors whose work we are to examine—Hannah More, Legh Richmond, Rowland Hill and Mrs. Sherwood—possess certain characteristics in common. They hold similar

³ M. M. Maison, *Search your Soul, Eustace* (London, 1961), p. 97.

^{3a} Reprinted conveniently in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London, 1963).

views about the fundamentals of Christianity. Each believes very strongly in the total depravity of fallen humanity, and, as we might expect, insist with equal vehemence on the necessity of regeneration by the sovereign grace of God. They declare it to be no more than the duty of professing Christians to conduct their lives according to the standards of the New Testament. It is their burden that the existing state of society should be maintained, and that those in authority should be obeyed as well as prayed for; they inculcate loyalty to the king and obedience to the magistrate on the part of all. The other pillar of the state, the established Church, they usually represent in an idealized picture, but even when criticism of indolent or deistic clergymen and infidel "rational dissenters" is most strongly voiced, as in Hill's *Village Dialogues*, care is taken to urge respect for the cloth and reverence for the scriptural liturgy and godly order of the Church. They would persuade the wealthy and powerful to exercise benevolence in all things and charity in particular towards the needy and deserving poor, while they teach the lower orders the Christian duty of godly industry, quiet subordination and pious contentment; the middle classes should neither ape their superiors nor exploit their inferiors. Sunday schools are praised and advocated. The particular aims of the numerous Christian Societies rarely enter the scene, but each of these evangelicals goes out of his way to stress the importance of kindness to animals, an interesting comment on the general attitude of the time.⁴

It will perhaps be objected that the books to be discussed are scarcely novels in the accepted sense of the word. This we must admit. But we can counter the charge by maintaining, firstly, that with the exception of Hannah More's Tracts these evangelical tales are all prose fictions of a length longer than that usually regarded as suitable for the short story (and, as E. M. Forster would remind us, they do tell a story), and, secondly, that they are probably the most important and influential narratives from a historical point of view and the most interesting and valuable intrinsically.

I. HANNAH MORE

No excursion into the English scene of the later eighteenth century is complete without at least a mention of Hannah More. Into her long life (1745-1833) she crowded three separate careers.

⁴ That this concern was not peculiar to evangelicals, or to those four under discussion, is shown by Mrs. Trimmer's book already mentioned, and by one reviewed favourably in her *Guardian of Education*, I (1802), p. 323: *The Hare; or, Hunting Incompatible with Humanity. Written as a Stimulus to Youth towards a Proper Treatment of Animals* (1799).

As a young woman fresh from teaching in Bristol she started fashionable London with her wit and poetic talent, joined the "Bluestockings" and became an associate of Johnson, Garrick and Reynolds. Only one word from William Wilberforce was needed to start her on her pioneering educational work among the poverty-stricken villages of the Cheddar region. She was an internationally-known reformer of manners and a religious propagandist, appealing to the great to recognize the unchristian tendencies of their fashionable habits and to face the challenge of the Christianity they professed, and, with equal facility, offering her advice to the middle and lower ranks on how to live the Christian life. Her work specifically written for the poorer classes was intended to counteract the influence of both their usual cheap reading matter and the flood of infidel and revolutionary literature inspired by the "new philosophy" so conspicuously successful in France and the hard times experienced by the poor in England. Hannah More knew everybody, those worth knowing and those not, from the highest of the aristocracy to the humble villagers whose children attended her schools, from Bishops to obscure and vilified country curates, from Dr. Johnson himself to Lactilla, the Muse of Milk.⁵

Those who write about Hannah More celebrate her wit, or her representative significance as the correspondent of a host of important people, or her educational and social achievements, or (rarely) her religious influence. Almost invariably they accord her writings a very lowly place as literature. Only her letters receive approval—"No one who has read the great letter-writers of the eighteenth century would deny her letters high praise."⁶ Everything else is brushed aside—even by those who have read it—as of negligible literary value, although its documentary richness is acknowledged.⁷ Hannah More was a prolific writer, but we must ignore her plays and poems and the array of her moral essays, and consider only her prose fiction: her one novel and her tales. The novel is *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, which was published anonymously in December 1808, and was very popular. "It cannot be denied," wrote W. P. Courtney, "that the novel swept through the land with the force of a tornado".⁸ Within nine months eleven

⁵ Mrs. Ann Yearsley, a Bristol milk-woman, with whose poetical talent Hannah More was greatly impressed. The sad story of her patronage and its outcome is told in M. G. Jones, *Hannah More* (Cambridge, 1952), pp. 73-76; Charlotte Yonge, *Hannah More* (London, 1888), pp. 62f., etc.

⁶ M. G. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. ix.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.x.

⁸ *The Secrets of our National Literature* (London, 1908), p. 48.

editions had been called for and exhausted. Before her death its author heard that thirty editions, each of a thousand copies, had been sold in America. Its popularity is attested by the immediate exploitation of the hero's name by other authors: Colonel Robert Torrens was first with his *Coelibia Choosing a Husband* in 1809, but he was followed by *Coelebs Married* (1814), *Coelebs Deceived* (1817), *The Laws and Practice of Whist, by Coelebs, M.A.* (1851, 3rd ed. 1858) and *Coelebs in Search of a Cook* (1860).⁹

The original *Coelebs* was written for the upper classes. Charlotte Yonge's summary succinctly describes the book's contents. "Coelebs is a young gentleman of four-and-twenty, very carefully brought up by an excellent mother, and serving as a peg upon which to hang numerous sketches of society and character. Coelebs goes forth, instructed by his mother, and enamoured of the character of Milton's Eve, to seek for as near a likeness of the latter as may exist, but, in accordance with the dying wishes of his parents, intends to come to no decision till he has consulted his father's old friend, Mr. Stanley".¹⁰ Before he reaches the Stanleys he meets several fashionable people in London, all of whom, some more and some less, exhibit characteristics which he privately condemns, usually in the realm of the upbringing and education of their children. Coelebs is happier with the Belfields, but even they are too easy-going. At last he arrives at Stanley Grove, "where, of course, all is perfect, especially the eldest daughter, Lucilla, who is altogether the model woman".¹¹ Much is said on the subject of female education, and even more on various theological topics. Coelebs's adventures in London (if such they may be called) and all the preliminary scene-setting occupy only the first 166 pages of volume one—the rest of the first volume (to page 415), and the whole of the second (equally lengthy), is taken up with life and discussion at Stanley Grove.¹² The reader had been warned by the sub-title: *Coelebs in Search of a Wife, Comprehending Observations on Domestic Habits and Manners, Religion and Morals*. Finally, Coelebs becomes engaged to Lucilla with the full approbation of the Stanleys, and discovers that this event had been the dearest wish of his parents.

Although Hannah More published *Coelebs* anonymously, its authorship became an open secret after a very short time. She had been well enough known already to merit inclusion in late

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49. Courtney seems to have missed *Coelebs Married*, however.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 148.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹² Using the 6th ed., 1809.

eighteenth-century biographical literary dictionaries.¹³ By 1808, however, Hannah More was even better known, for her reputation had been heightened by her social and educational work (and not least by the "Blagdon persecution") and by her continued literary activities, not now witty verses or fashionable tragedies, but explicitly moral essays informed by a deeply personal Christianity. In attempting a Christian novel Hannah More was breaking new ground. She had already had experience of writing fiction for the common people, but with *Coelebs* she had a more difficult aim in view. It had been hard work to produce attractive and vigorous tales cheap enough for the literate poor to want to buy; it was much harder to try to wrench the higher ranks of society away from their favourite romantic and melodramatic fiction. Nobody had expressed stronger disapproval of novels than Hannah More. In different works she had condemned them as "one of the most universal, as well as most pernicious, sources of corruption",¹⁴ and had particularly attacked French novelists, who "not only seduce the heart through the senses, and corrupt it through the medium of the imagination, but fatally strike at the very root and being of all virtue, by annihilating all belief in that religion which is its only vital source and seminal principle".¹⁵ In holding these opinions Hannah More was, of course, in a strong Christian ascetic tradition.

Justifying her apparent volte-face in a letter to her old friend Sir William Waller Pepys in 1809, she writes:

I wrote it to amuse the languor of disease. I thought there were already good books enough in the world for good people; but there was a large class of readers whose wants had not been attended to;—the subscribers to the circulating library. A little to raise the tone of that mart of mischief, and to counteract its corruptions, I thought was an object worth attempting.¹⁶

She had never forgotten being rebuked by Johnson for alluding

¹³ She rates entries in Marshall, *Catalogue of Five Hundred Celebrated Authors of Great Britain Now Living* (London, 1788), and D. Rivers, *Literary Memoirs of Living Authors of Great Britain*, 2 vols. (London, 1798). Even Piggott, the scurrilous radical, devotes space to Hannah More in his chapter on "The Bluestocking Jockies" in *The Female Jockey Club, or a Sketch of the Manners of the Age*, 5th ed. (London, 1794), where he dubs her "a downright Bishop H-rsl-y in petticoats" (p. 193).

¹⁴ *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799), in *Works* (1836) III, p. 126.

¹⁵ *Hints Towards Forming the Character of a Young Princess* (1805), in *Works* (1837) IV, p. 285.

¹⁶ W. Roberts (ed.), *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs. Hannah More*, 2nd ed. (London, 1834) III, p. 313f.

flippantly to *Tom Jones*.¹⁷ If another of her correspondents, James Stephen, is to be believed, she achieved her purpose, for he asserts that most of her readers have been "withdrawn from the trash of a circulating library or from still worse subjects of amusement".¹⁸ The Rev. John Venn, writing from Clapham early in 1810, is representative of her friends when he says, "I can truly declare that I look upon *Coelebs* as one of the most useful books which was ever written, for the purpose which it was intended to answer".¹⁹ Only Alexander Knox and the Henry Thorntons among her circle seem to have been puzzled and dismayed by the novel's appearance.²⁰ The *Christian Observer*, however, the evangelical periodical, began its review, "It may be very true that novels are mischievous; but we cannot allow this work to be called a novel". As Robert D. Mayo comments, "When it at last found a novel which it could tolerate, it would not allow it to be called a novel".²¹ The reviewer had not recognized Hannah More in the anonymous author of *Coelebs*, and in an otherwise favourable notice complained that the book was "apt to be vulgar" and discovered in it "some want of taste and strict moral delicacy".²² Her indignant letter to Zachary Macaulay, the editor, which was followed by an apologetic note in the next number, brought Hannah More's career as a polite moral novelist to an abrupt conclusion.²³

In trying to counteract the corruptions of the circulating libraries Hannah More was writing in a wholly secular form. She therefore expected and received reviews by critics who judged according to secular literary criteria, as well as an acrimonious letter from the Rev. Joseph Berington, the Roman Catholic Vicar-General.²⁴ On the whole the periodicals were favourable towards *Coelebs*,²⁵

¹⁷ Roberts I, pp. 168f.

¹⁸ Roberts III, p. 309.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

²⁰ M. G. Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 196f.

²¹ *The English Novel in the Magazines, 1740-1815* (Evanston, 1962), p. 359. On p. 421 he quotes *Christian Observer*, VIII, February 1809, p. 109.

²² M. G. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

²³ A. Roberts (ed.), *Letters of Hannah More to Zachary Macaulay* (London, 1860), pp. 27-31.

²⁴ Roberts III, pp. 274-285.

²⁵ Some comments were: "Its beauties are great and conspicuous" (*European Magazine*, LVI, September 1809, p. 378); "The motive of the writer is not more commendable than the skill, the discrimination, and the general taste with which the whole is executed" (*Monthly Review*, LVIII, February 1809, p. 136); "We have not read a work which combines the *utile cum dulci* more completely" (*British Critic*, XXXIII, May 1809, p. 490).

but while they approved her purpose, the reviewers nearly all criticized Hannah More's "methodistical" leanings, particularly her severe attitude towards amusements, her scheme of religious education exemplified in *Lucilla Stanley*, and her insistence on the doctrine of total depravity. It was her brand of evangelical Christianity that offended. Sydney Smith, writing in the *Edinburgh Review*, enjoyed himself at the expense of *Coelebs*, describing it as a "dramatic sermon", and its hero as "a mere clod or dolt", while the book as a whole, he insisted, "abounds with marks of negligence and want of skill; with representations of life and manners which are either false or trite".²⁶ In the letter to Pepys already quoted, however, Hannah More remarked, with her tongue in her cheek, "I own I felt the sale of ten large impressions in the first six months (twelve have now gone) as a full consolation for the barbed arrows of Mr. S[mith] and Mr. C[umberland]".

Modern writers on Hannah More have nearly all followed Sydney Smith's lead with regard to *Coelebs*, if they have attempted to discuss it as literature. Even the Rev. Henry Thompson, in his pioneer biography, speaks of it apologetically. "It is no more a novel than the dialogues of Plato. . . . It is . . . a treatise, . . . a narrative essay on the choice of a wife".²⁷ Hannah More's last biographer dismisses it as "completely lacking in artistic quality",²⁸ The latest critical comment suggests perceptively that the book "derives from the periodical essay" but fails by its incomplete transformation into the narrative medium—"if it were a novel at all".²⁹ Indeed, everybody points out that *Coelebs* lacks plot and credible characters and action, and the charge must be admitted. As a story it fails dismally. We don't care what happens next. It is true that *Coelebs* himself—the narrator—is all that he has been called, "an insufferable egoist", "a totally uninteresting prig".³⁰ The perfect evangelical young woman, *Lucilla*, is too good (or too bad, according to your point of view) to be anything like true. (Thompson defends the character by reminding us that she was drawn to be a model, and the portrait therefore aimed at perfection.)³¹ The innumerable conversations are conducted in what was by 1808 old-fashioned Johnsonese, and they sound quiet impossibly

²⁶ Vol. XIV, no. 27, April 1809, pp. 146f.

²⁷ *The Life of Hannah More, with Notices of her Sisters* (London, 1838), pp. 243f.

²⁸ M. G. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

²⁹ W. L. Renwick, *English Literature, 1789-1815* (Oxford, 1963), p. 66.

³⁰ M. G. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

³¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 242.

ponderous and pretentious 150 years later. Moreover, Hannah More seems to write at second-hand. Her observation and experience, her purposeful and determined sincerity, her wit and her real literary gifts, seem powerless to prevent her from gearing everything down and presenting her narrative, however vigorous and vivid in parts, at a distance. There is no immediacy. The reader sees and hears, as it were, through a glass panel, the effect of which is to distance the scene, to slow down the action, and to standardize the dialogue. The impression is the same as that given by her moral essays, and quite unlike what the modern reader expects from realistic fiction. *Coelebs* reads like a collection of periodical essays. In this respect Hannah More is very different from Mrs. Sherwood and Rowland Hill.

And yet *Coelebs* had an immense vogue in England and America. Dr. M. G. Jones suggests two reasons.

It presented a "calumniated religion" as the religion of the home in an easy and attractive guise and thus contributed to the growing popularity of Evangelicalism. At the same time it offered to its readers among the middle classes, anxious for instruction in "decorous conduct", a valued guide to feminine propriety, written by a woman of recognized religious and social position.³²

Doubtless Hannah More's reputation, once her authorship was established and admitted, helped to sell the book, but its religious opinions stuck in the throats of most of the reviewers, and the stricter evangelicals had to persuade themselves that it was not a novel before they could read it. But there are other qualities—to *Coelebs*, besides timely appearance and the reputation of its author. It is written with all Hannah More's confident good sense in her best ironic epigrammatic style. Professor W. L. Renwick considers that she conveys her moral principles in "lucid good-humoured eighteenth-century prose, with some lively observation, an interest in human motives, some humour, much shrewdness, considerable wisdom, and solid determination".³³ Hannah More anticipates and answers her critics in her preface.

The novel-reader will reject it as dull; the religious may throw it aside as frivolous: the one will accuse it of excessive strictness; the other of censurable levity. . . . The texture of the narrative is so slight, that it barely serves for a ground, into which to weave the sentiments and observations which it was designed to introduce. . . . The speeches may be charged with a degree of stiffness, and with a length not altogether consistent with familiar dialogue. . . . If it be

³² *Op. cit.*, p. 193.

³³ *Op. cit.*, p. 67.

objected, that religious characters have been too industriously brought forward, and their faults somewhat too severely treated, let it be remembered, that while it is one of the principal objects of the work to animadvert on those very faults, it has never been done with the insidious design of depreciating the religion, but with the view, by exposing the fault, to correct the practice.³⁴

So *Coelebs* was an attempt to expound her principles to those readers who would never dream of opening her *Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great*, or her *Estimate of the Religion of the Fashionable World*, or her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, or even her much earlier *Essays for Young Ladies*. In this whole praiseworthy aim Hannah More succeeded. Although the criticism which she forestalled remain valid, *Coelebs* cannot be dismissed. Augustine Birrell was entitled to his opinion that it is "an impossible book", but was merely stupid to bury his nineteen-volume set of Hannah More's works in his garden.³⁵

The contemporary reviewers quoted vast tracts of the novel to illustrate the elegance of its style and the correctness or otherwise of its principles, but a biographer later in the century announced that she would not be "so cruel as to inflict upon our readers criticisms upon and quotations from any of Hannah More's works". "Give us Hannah's company, but not—not her writings", she cries, and asks, "Who gets lost in 'Coelebs'?"³⁶ More stolidly, Annette Meakin gives it as her opinion that "*Coelebs* is perhaps the most religious novel that ever was penned, at least by an able writer"³⁷ In theme and execution it is completely controlled by Hannah More's gentle but thorough-going evangelical Christianity. Elegant, good-humoured, witty, amusing, observant, shrewd, wise, utterly sincere and rigorously determined—Hannah More's personal character is that of her writing. As Margaret Cropper puts it, "Hannah is readable, she has style".³⁸ Like all her writing, *Coelebs* proceeds at an even tenor with sophisticated eighteenth-century ease and grace. We can illustrate only briefly. *Coelebs* is describing his first visit to Sir John Belfield's in London. He has met a gentleman just returned from Egypt whom he wishes to

³⁴ *Works* (1837) VII, pp. v-vii.

³⁵ *In the Name of the Bodleian, and other Essays* (London, 1906), pp. 117-124. I am indebted to Mr. J. E. Vaughan for drawing my attention to this book.

³⁶ L. B. Walford, *Four Biographies from 'Blackwood'* (Edinburgh & London, 1888), pp. 166, 217.

³⁷ *Hannah More: a Biographical Study* (London, 1911), p. 374.

³⁸ *Sparks among the Stubble* (London, 1955), p. 153.

question, but immediately after dinner the children rush in and have to be suitably seated among the guests.

At last, when they were all disposed of, I resumed my inquiries about the resting-place of the mummies; but the grand dispute who should have oranges, and who should have almonds and raisins, soon raised such a clamour, that it was impossible to hear my Egyptian friend. This great contest was, however, at length settled, and I was returning to the antiquities of Memphis, when the important point, who should have red wine, and who should have white, who should have half a glass, and who a whole one, set us again in an uproar. Sir John was visibly uneasy, and commanded silence. During this interval of peace, I gave up the catacombs, and took refuge in the pyramids. But I had no sooner proposed my question about the serpent said to be found in one of them, than the son and heir, a fine little fellow just six years old, reaching out his arm to dart an apple across the table at his sister, roguishly intending to upset her glass, unluckily overthrew his own, brimful of port wine. The whole contents were discharged on the elegant drapery of a white-robed nymph. All was now agitation and distress, and disturbance and confusion. The gentlemen ringing for napkins, the ladies assisting the dripping fair one; each vying with the other who should recommend the most approved specific for getting out the stain of red wine; and comforting the sufferer by stories of similar misfortunes. The poor little culprit was dismissed, and all difficulties and disasters seemed at last surmounted. But you cannot heat up again an interest which has been so often cooled. The thread of conversation had been so frequently broken, that I despaired of seeing it tied together again. I sorrowfully gave up catacombs, pyramids, and serpent.³⁹

That is a representative piece of Hannah More's handling of incident in *Coelebs*; there are her qualities, and there also is to be felt that curious distancing effect already mentioned. Here is Coeleb's description of Lucilla Stanley, his future wife:

Her conversation, like her countenance, is compounded of liveliness, sensibility, and delicacy. She does not say things to be quoted, but the effect of her conversation is, that it leaves an impression of pleasure on the mind, and a love of goodness on the heart. She enlivens without dazzling, and entertains without overpowering. Contented to please, she has no ambition to shine. There is nothing like effort in her expression, or vanity in her manner. She has rather a playful gaiety than a pointed wit. . . . The dress of Lucilla is not neglected, and it is not studied. She is as neat as the strictest delicacy demands, and as fashionable as the strictest delicacy permits; and her nymph-like form does not appear to less advantage for being veiled with scrupulous modesty.⁴⁰

There is no attempt at a detailed rendering of the girl's features or her appearance. There is no particularizing; it is all generalized. It becomes very clear that the tradition in which Hannah More is

³⁹ *Works* (1837) VII, p. 31.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 101ff.

writing is not that of realistic fiction. She is simply dramatizing her moral essays. *Coelebs* is very much a series of eighteenth-century periodical essays drawn together in a slight narrative framework. This is the reason for the pervasive impression of distance. It needs to be added that *Coelebs*, like most of her works, is worth reading if only for Hannah More's conscientious and eminently practical explorations of the demands made by evangelical Christianity on every department of the lives of its professors.

Hannah More's Cheap Repository Tracts have already been mentioned. The story of their origin and development is of considerable interest. On October 25, 1789, the Mores' first village school was opened, at Cheddar. In 1791 Tom Paine's *Rights of Man*, Part One, was published, an event which marked the beginning of a "Jacobin" propaganda campaign. England began to be flooded with revolutionary pamphlets. The Government initiated repressive measures which proved helpless to check their spread. It was Bishop Porteus of London who realized that his old friend Hannah More was peculiarly qualified to make some reply in kind, because of her knowledge of the poorer people gained in her Somerset schools. To combat the plentiful supply of literature advocating infidelity, disloyalty and immorality, such a reply, urging piety and subordination, would have to be attractive, readable, understandable, and cheap. Although at first she refused to undertake the task, "in an evil hour, against my will and judgment", as she put it,⁴¹ Hannah More composed a little pamphlet called *Village Politics, by Will Chip*, and published it early in 1792. It was immediately successful and had a rapid and extensive circulation; the Government, loyal associations and patriotic individuals all had it reprinted to be sold or given away. Bishop Porteus wrote gratefully from Fulham Palace to his dear Mrs. Chip, and one of her opponents asserted during the "Blagdon controversy" that she had been in the pay of the Government.⁴² Again the Bishop of London wrote, this time requesting Hannah More to "draw out a very plain summary of the Evidencies of Christianity, brought down to the level of Will Chip and Jack Anvil, exactly as you have done in *Village Politics*".⁴³

The promptings of the authorities were not the only incentive

⁴¹ Roberts II, p. 376.

⁴² *The Life of Hannah More. With a Critical Review of her Writings. By the Rev. Sir Archibald Mac Sarcasm, Bart.* (London, 1802), p. 18. By the Rev. William Shaw, Rector of Chelvey.

⁴³ Roberts II, p. 366.

Hannah More had to write tracts. Hard at work promoting her village schools, she was confronted with the problem of the newly-literate adults she and her teachers had taught to read who required some form of cheap literature. She told Bishop Beadon in her letter to him during the "Blagdon controversy", "To teach the poor to read, without providing them with *safe* books has always appeared to me an improper measure, and this induced me to the laborious undertaking of the Cheap Repository tracts".⁴⁴ The poor could get radical works cheap, and if they could read the Bible they could read Tom Paine too. It is true that Mrs. Trimmer's moral tales and her *Family Magazine* were specifically designed "to counteract the pernicious tendency of immoral books, &c.", but they cost far more than infidel pamphlets. "The peculiar merit of Hannah More's scheme was that it was designed to meet the enemy on his own ground by the production of tracts and broadsides, in outward appearance as nearly as possible resembling the chapman's wares, at a competitive price".⁴⁵ The driving force behind the project came from the Clapham Sect, and the Treasurer of the Cheap Repository Tract scheme throughout its history was, inevitably, Henry Thornton. Prospectuses were circulated inviting subscriptions; Horace Walpole promised his in January 1795 before any tracts had been issued. The first batch appeared on March 3 of that year. By April 18, 300,000 had been sold; by July, 700,000; by March, 1796, over 2,000,000. "There had never been anything like it in the history of English books".⁴⁶ The Treasurer announced in 1796 that he would need no further subscriptions for some time, and there is no evidence that the subscription was ever re-opened.⁴⁷ From May 1795 onwards, three tracts were published on the first of every month, of which one was a ballad in broadside form, one a moral tale, and one a "Sunday reading". Over a hundred items were issued, more than fifty of them written by Hannah More herself using the signature "Z". The scheme had closed by September 22, 1798, on which date Hannah More rejoiced in her diary that her work in that connexion was over.⁴⁸ The strain on her frail health of what amounted to high-pressure journalism of an exacting nature was one reason for the end of the

⁴⁴ H. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

⁴⁵ G. H. Spinney, "Cheap Repository Tracts: Hazard and Marshall Edition", *The Library*, XX (1939-40), p. 299.

⁴⁶ R. D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago, 1957), p. 75.

⁴⁷ G. H. Spinney, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

⁴⁸ Roberts III, p. 61.

tracts; another was probably a serious disagreement with her publisher, John Marshall. But the achievement remained.

Their experience with the Cheap Repository Tracts encouraged the Evangelicals to believe they had found the right formula. If correct morality and sound religion and political doctrine were embedded in wholesomely entertaining tales and songs, humble readers would accept those principles, and the nation would be secure. Thus emerged the rationale, half religious, half political, which was to govern the vast program of tract distribution for a long time to come. . . . Tom Paine and Hannah More between them had opened the book to the common English reader.⁴⁹

The Tracts, then, hold an important place in English social history. They are historically valuable also because "they are a matchless statement of the least dissimulating kind, wholly authentic in every part and respect, of Evangelical views on all pertinent moral, social, political and religious topics".⁵⁰ That is to say they are source-documents for ecclesiastical historians. Today, in wholly dissimilar circumstances, are they readable? Are they, in other words, literature, of however humble a kind? Margaret Cropper at least has no doubts: "Perhaps the chief thing one notices in reading Hannah's tracts . . . is their vigour and entertainment value. Even now one cannot put them down, the colour is splashed on with such an air; the black is so black, and the white is so white".⁵¹ The vast number published makes it possible to exaggerate their importance as factors in the reform of the poor; but it is harder to over-estimate their literary qualities. Hannah More writes with conviction from her experience, and with a vigour and a relish which exploit to the full her virtues as a witty conversationalist and her easy, polished, urbane eighteenth century style. The descriptive material has historical value as a contemporary account of the life of the lower and middle classes at the end of the century.

Farmers "old and new style", labourers, craftsmen, shop-keepers, servants, beggars, poachers, thieves, prostitutes, informers, vagrants, are depicted in the lively ballads and tales. Clerics, always treated with respect, for it was part of Miss More's deliberate intention to rehabilitate them in public estimation, squires, Justices of the Peace, Sir John Fielding's men, prison-warders, represent law and order. Hannah More, her sisters and her friends, disguised as "Mrs. Jones"

⁴⁹ R. D. Altick, *op. cit.*, pp. 76f.

⁵⁰ F. K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians* (Cambridge, 1961), p. 124. [It should be noted that this book has been subjected to damaging criticism by David Newsome in a long review in the *Historical Journal*, VI (1963), pp. 295-310.]

⁵¹ M. Cropper, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

and "Mrs. White", appear as the social workers, organizing schools, women's clubs and district visiting.⁵²

It has been recently claimed that the tracts established Hannah More "beyond question, and very likely for all time, as the world's leading practitioner in this kind of art".⁵³

The Shepherd of Salisbury Plain, one of the first to be issued, is the most famous of all the tracts. One of the *Tales for the Common People* designed "not only to counteract vice and profligacy . . . but error, discontent, and false religion",⁵⁴ it is a tale from real life, about one David Saunders of West Lavington and his pious contentment in the most deprived circumstances. He, his wife and eight children live in a hovel with "one room above and below", on six shillings a week. The tract consists of an extended interview between the shepherd and Mr. Johnson, "a very worthy charitable gentleman", said to be a portrait of Sir James Stonhouse. Part Two tells of the gentleman's visit to the hovel, and his charitable establishment of the shepherd and his family in a larger and better cottage as the minister's clerk and master of a new Sunday school. Professor F. K. Brown says that this work is "the greatest of Mrs. More's tracts and of all tracts . . . a flawless masterpiece perfect in conception and in execution, likely to remain forever peerless on a height the moral tale will not reach again".⁵⁵ William Wilberforce declared he would rather go up to render his account at the last day carrying with him *The Shepherd of Salisbury Plain* than with all the volumes of Sir Walter Scott, "full as they are of genius".⁵⁶ It presents the upper classes as pious and charitable, the ideal poor as pious, industrious and contented with their lot, and the clergy as godly preaching pastors. The appalling conditions of the poor are ruthlessly exposed and the evangelical virtues are inculcated. The detail is exact and unsparing. The tract is "full of wonderful things perfectly said";⁵⁷ the dialogue is conducted on a realistic level, unlike that of *Coelebs*. But there is no action, and this tract therefore lacks the characteristic vigour and vividness of many of the others. Wilberforce and Professor Brown were not judging by literary criteria.

⁵² M. G. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 145

⁵³ F. K. Brown, *loc. cit.*

⁵⁴ *Works* (1836) I, p. 249.

⁵⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 144.

⁵⁶ R. I. and S. Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce* (London, 1838) V, p. 254, quoted by F. K. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

⁵⁷ F. K. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

More vivid, more vigorous and more interesting is *Betty Brown, the St. Giles's Orange Girl*,⁵⁸ issued for August 1796. It opens, "Betty Brown, the Orange Girl, was born nobody knows where and bred nobody knows how". Her early life as an orphan beggar is recounted with brilliant economy before we hear of her acquaintance with Mrs. Sponge, the money-lender, "who kept a little shop, and a kind of eating-house for poor working people, not far from the Seven Dials. She also bought, as well as sold, many kinds of second-hand things, and was not scrupulous to know whether what she bought was honestly come by, provided she could get it for a sixth part of what it was worth". This woman sets Betty up as an orange girl by loaning her a barrow and five shillings. "Mrs. Sponge knew what she was about. Betty was a lively girl, who had a knack at learning anything; and so well looking through all her dirt and rags, that there was little doubt she would get custom". She charges Betty sixpence a day interest, and takes the rest of the girl's proceeds for her board and lodging in her horrible house. The story is told with controlled, ironic gusto. Betty is saved from this slavery by a Justice's wife who tells her to save hard and repay Mrs. Sponge the original loan, which she does. Mrs. Sponge is arrested and committed to prison for receiving stolen goods. Betty thrives at business, goes to church, hears the gospel for the first time, seeks instruction from the lady, learns to read, and, although we are not told in so many words, is doubtless converted. The tale ends with a summary of Betty's progress and a representative piece of advertising:

Betty, by industry and piety, rose in the world, till at length she came to keep that handsome sausage-shop near the Seven Dials, and was married to that very hackney-coachman, whose history and honest character may be learned from the popular ballad which bears his name.⁵⁹

Noteworthy is the deft way in which Hannah More particularizes her scene and thus achieves the realistic touch so necessary if she were to rival the "true" accounts of executions, confessions and crimes which furnished much of the reading matter among the poor. She had not collected and read vast numbers of popular "vulgar, licentious, and seditious publications"⁶⁰ for nothing; her thoroughness of preparation was remarkable. Bishop Porteus complimented her on "those invaluable original products, both in prose and in verse, which you have collected together from your

⁵⁸ *Works* (1837) II, pp. 167-180.

⁵⁹ *I.e.*, *The Hackney Coachman*, in *Works* (1837) VI, pp. 52-53.

⁶⁰ Roberts II, p. 425.

friends the village hawkers and peddlars; they would form the best *sans culotte* library in Europe".⁶¹

Black Giles the Poacher,⁶² Part One of which was issued for November, and Part Two for December, 1796, is another of Hannah More's best tales. It is an account of a family "who had rather live by their wits than their work". From the very beginning the scene is localized and the reader forced to participate,

Poaching Giles lives on the borders of one of those great moors in Somersetshire. Giles, to be sure, has been a sad fellow in his time; and it is none of his fault if his whole family do not end their career either at the gallows or at Botany Bay. He lives at that mud cottage with the broken windows, stuffed with dirty rags, just beyond the gate which divides the Upper from the Lower Moor. You may know the house at a good distance by the ragged tiles on the roof, and the loose stones which are ready to drop out of the chimney; though a short ladder, a hod of mortar, and half an hour's leisure time, would have prevented all this, and made the little dwelling tight enough. But, as Giles had never learnt anything that was good, so he did not know the value of such useful sayings, as, that "a tile in time saves nine". Besides this, Giles fell into that common mistake, that a beggarly-looking cottage, and filthy ragged children, raised most compassion, and of course drew most charity.

Part One tells of Giles's usual habits of poaching and stealing. Part Two, "The History of Widow Brown's Apple Tree", deals with Giles's theft of the poor woman's superabundant crop of apples, his placing of the blame on the godly little Tom Price, the eventual confession of his son Dick "who had naturally a tender heart", and the sudden death of Giles from injuries sustained by the collapse of an old wall from which he was trying to steal a net.

The poor wretch could neither pray himself, nor attend to the minister. . . . He languished a few days, and died in great misery:— a fresh and sad instance that people who abuse the grace of God, and resist his Spirit, find it difficult to repent when they will.

The moral is rarely left merely to be inferred.

Tawney Rachel, or the Fortune Teller; with some account of dreams, omens, and conjurers,⁶³ issued for April, 1797, concerns Black Giles's wife. After a most entertaining account of her fraudulent dealings with the ignorant and superstitious country folk, which includes some delightful dialogue, Rachel is sentenced to be transported to Botany Bay for trickery and theft over a period of many years. The tale concludes:

I have thought it my duty to print this little history, as a kind warning to all you young men and maidens, not to have anything to

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 428.

⁶² *Works* (1837) II, pp. 181-207.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 208-220.

say to *cheats, imposters, cunning-women, fortune-tellers, conjurers, and interpreters of dreams*. Listen to me, your true friend, when I assure you that God never reveals to weak and wicked women those secret designs of his providence which no human wisdom is able to foresee. To consult those false oracles is not only foolish, but sinful. . . . Never believe that God conceals his will from a sober Christian who obeys his laws, and reveals it to a vagabond gipsy, who runs up and down breaking the laws both of God and man. King Saul never consulted the witch till he had left off serving God. The Bible will direct us what to do, better than any conjurer; and there are no days unlucky, but those which we make so by our own vanity, sin, and folly.

It is a measure of Hannah More's authority that she can break into her tale in her own person to point the moral in a little sermon and not spoil the story—rather, her moral is felt to be the only possible conclusion.

The nature and quality of the Cheap Repository Tracts in prose is by now sufficiently clear. The time would fail to tell of *The Two Shoemakers*, or *Tom White the Post-Boy*, or *Hester Wilmot*, or of those aimed at the middle classes, like *Mr. Fantom and his Man William*, or *The Two Wealthy Farmers*, or *The Sunday School*. The ballads too all go with a swing and put over their respective messages with humour and complete clarity. While much that was claimed for the Tracts in the way of practical effect may be suspect,⁶⁴ the fact that Cobbett, in his *Monthly Religious Tracts* of 1821, set out to dissociate order and religion, speaks volumes for Hannah More's success a quarter of a century earlier in identifying religion and the established order, and in teaching piety, contentment and subordination to the poor.⁶⁵

Hannah More is the only evangelical author of accepted literary stature in the period, and she is counted among the most minor of writers. In her day, however, she was a literary Colossus. In her person evangelical Christianity attained respectability, sophistication and immense influence among all classes. *Coelebs* and the Tracts possess different merits, but both ventures succeeded beyond all expectation in gaining popularity with those for whom they were written. They are still well worth reading, not least for

⁶⁴ *Patient Joe, the Newcastle Collier*, issued for July 1795, is said to have "solved all the labour problems in the North of England", and the singing of *The Riot, of Half a Loaf is Better than no Bread*, one of the three Tracts for August 1795, is supposed to have effectively checked a very formidable riot at Bath in 1796 (M. G. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 147). Of *Turn the Carpet, or the Two Weavers*, published in July 1796, Bishop Porteus laughed, "Here you have Bishop Butler's *Analogy*, all for a half-penny" (Charlotte Yonge, *op. cit.*, p. 115). These three Tracts were all in verse.

⁶⁵ M. G. Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 147f.

the sheer clear-headed good sense of their author's Christian principles.⁶⁶ Today *Coelebs* seems long-winded, verbose, uninteresting—certainly not a novel; but lapse of time and change of taste cannot conceal its essential quality as a monument of sincere, dedicated, yet sophisticated, Christian writing. The Tracts are better able to hold their own as lively, compelling tales, which elevated a species of ephemeral journalism into a genuine kind of creative literature.

(To be concluded)

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⁶⁶ Strangely, the Religious Tract Society (founded in 1799) at first regarded Hannah More's Tracts as doctrinally inadequate, but had finally to adopt her methods of catering for the taste of the new reading public (M. G. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 150).