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# The BAPTIST QUARTERLY

THE JOURNAL OF THE BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOLUME XXXI

JULY 1985

No. 3

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## EDITORIAL

Our last issue contained a review of Dr Doreen Rosman's important study *Evangelicals and Culture*, a book whose scope is obviously much wider than that of nonconformity but nevertheless rich in material for those seeking to reflect on the relationships (or lack of them) between dissenters and literary taste. Further exploration of this vein is provided in this issue, in Dr Alan Sell's study of John Chater. The story of Sandemanianism may be one of the eighteenth century's dissenting By-Path Meadows but it is of no less interest for that and, as Dr Sell shows, there are some significant points of contact with the Baptist story of the period. It is Chater as would-be novelist who primarily engages Dr Sell's interest - and once again much is provided on which to ponder, concerning the relation between religious moralism and the milieu of the time. Dr Sell refers to the 'underlying and unrepentant didacticism' of Chater's *Tom Rigby*. But, lest we assume that this tone was a direct product simply of Chater's brand of evangelicalism we are quickly reminded that 'this accords well with the eighteenth-century understanding of nature as an order operating in accordance with immutable laws'. We might paraphrase this by saying that such a book was a child of the Age of Reason as much as of any form of biblicism.

From moralism to cant to hypocrisy is a journey readily made - or so it would appear to the many writers, from Victorian times onwards, who have viewed English Dissent as the most familiar traveller on this highway. Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Tennyson and others all had their jibes and sneers, not to mention Matthew Arnold and his identification of nonconformity as one of the main targets in his attack on 'phillistinism'. Of course there are the exceptions, most notably George Eliot with her loving portrait of Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede*. But a tradition was established whereby nonconformity supplied ready-to-hand caricatures of insensitive puritanism and smug religiosity. Moreover, even when the issue is no longer polemical, more recent writers can still instinctively portray Anglicanism as representing the human and homely in contrast to nonconformity. On a popular level a good example is Thomas Armstrong's vivid narrative portrait of life in the nineteenth century Yorkshire Dales, *Adam Brunskill*. There are richly detailed and dramatic scenes in the Wesleyan Chapel. The Anglican Parish Church hardly figures at all. Yet it is in that Parish Church that Cherry Dinsdale - denounced in the Chapel - chooses to be wed. There 'she loved everything, from the service to the soft light from delicately-chased oil-lamps which dimly illuminated the old high pews and Jacobean pulpit and dealt kindly with the severity of plaster and whitewash'.

In the final analysis, it is the question of whether virtue and moral heroism make for good literature; whether, as compared with villains, saints or would-be saints are anything more than worthy bores. But if so, then it is a problem besetting the portrayal of many more others than dissenters or even evangelicals in general. Take for instance a classic portrayal of religious doubt in late Victorian Anglican guise, *Robert Elsmere* by Mrs Humphrey Ward. Elsmere - young, academically brilliant, orthodox and sincere - meets the world of historical criticism. His orthodoxy collapses, he resigns his orders and takes up educational work of a religious-ethical kind in a London slum. As a human being, Elsmere - to one reader at least - is far more appealing before his great spiritual crisis, not on account of his erstwhile orthodoxy but his sheer human charm, not least in the delicate unfolding of his courtship and love for Catherine Leyburn. After the death of his orthodox belief, and the emergence of his new belief in what appears to be a neo-Hegelian idealism, he becomes little more than a spokesman for this new position - a very earnest spokesman certainly, but by very virtue of this fact a rather colourless character. What can the author do to rescue him from this fate? Only martyrdom can save him - which it does in the form of consumption contracted through his exertions in such an unsalubrious neighbourhood. Meanwhile the potentially most interesting character in the whole story, his sister-in-law Rose, a brilliant violinist, has long since vanished from the scene.

Characters in narrative fiction are at their most arresting when they are shown in their vulnerability as well as their moral strength. In this respect, it is noteworthy that the most celebrated of contemporary British authors who carries a religious identity into his work is a Roman Catholic, Graham Greene. And his characters, even when deeply religious, are hardly moral heroes. It is sometimes asked why there has not been a Protestant equivalent of Greene. The answer

may have to do with theology as much as literature and its social contexts (although American might claim John Updike for the role). Perhaps it is because Greene knows as a novelist what Protestants claim but scarcely dare believe, namely, justification by grace through faith. He can allow his central characters to be real sinners, and still lovable (even Pinkie in *Brighton Rock* is at least pitiable). Or do we need, in fact, to stray from our own tradition to find this illustrated? After all, *Pilgrim's Progress* is irresistible both as theology and as drama because Christian is so human. Mistakes and failures can still, *sola gratia*, be the way to the Heavenly City.

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'BYGONES' is a selection of extracts from the Minute Books of the East Hill Baptist Church, Wandsworth, founded in 1862. They have been made by the minister, Revd C. Alan Stephens. The duplicated sheets are bound in an attractive 'collage' cover, which well illustrates the life of the congregation. It is not produced by 'professional historians'; but other churches could well consider giving their congregations such a first hand acquaintance with their past, which will inform and stimulate the future.

Copies from Revd C. Alan Stephens, East Hill Baptist Church, Wandsworth, London SW18 2HD, at 60p per issue plus 25p postage, £5.00 for six issues (including postage).

ROGER HAYDEN