

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

when nothing was matured or consolidated as we now have it in our Articles and Liturgy? If they are prepared for such a movement, it will certainly be a new phase in the character of the historical, loyal, and influential High Churchmanship of England.

E. HOARE.

ART. II.—PRESERVATION OF PAROCHIAL REGISTERS.

WHAT a dry subject! Well, it is true that there is a certain dryness in any tabulated collection of bare facts. We readily admit that to few are the materials of history readable. Yet Parochial Chronicles have the charm which belongs to individuality and locality; and when they are so complete that there is scarcely a parish without its register, then in their entirety the personal and local are merged in the national, and what at first sight seemed only to appertain to individuals is found in reality to be of value to the whole nation and to be part and parcel of its history.

The written record of the baptisms, the marriages, and the burials of parishioners from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, is the only substitute we have in the past for the modern invention of the Decennial Census. In their continuous registration of particular facts these parish books describe, with a minuteness graphic to those who can understand them, the rise and fall of towns; the distribution of population; the relative importance of the South as compared with the North of England, of the East as compared with the West. With unerring accuracy they point to the recurrence of plagues; to the fat years and the lean years, and to their effect upon the lives and the marriages of the people. They throw light upon our nomenclature, and on all the curious inquiries respecting surnames and Christian names. They describe exactly the social and commercial condition of those whose names are entered. They are our only index to the average duration of life; it was by an appeal to parish registers that Sir Cornewall Lewis supported his theory that centenarians were not to be found. No pedigree can be proved in a court of law without recourse to them. They are in a very large sense the title-deeds to the landed property of this kingdom; and not the million owners of land, but the thirty millions who are their heirs at law, are deeply and personally interested in the preservation of the proofs of their title. To this dry subject we desire to call the attention of Churchmen.

In September, 1538, the first order for the systematic keeping

of Parochial Registers was promulgated by King Henry VIII., through his Ecclesiastical Viceregent and Lord Privy Seal, Thomas Cromwell. From time to time the practice has been confirmed by Act of Parliament, by Canon, by Episcopal injunction. At length in the year 1813 an Act called "Rose's Act" was passed. This statute is characterized as "extraordinary" by the Select Committee of the House of Commons which considered the subject in 1831. Yet, in truth, it is not more extraordinary in its adaptation of means to ends than the ordinary ecclesiastical legislation of Parliament. Among its absurdities may be mentioned its title, which includes the registration of births, but provides no means for ascertaining their date; a clause which directs transcripts of the registers to be sent to the Bishops, but fails to provide any compensation for the work of the transcriber, the sender, or the receiver; another which directs such transcripts to be arranged and indexed, but obliges no person to perform the duty and provides no compensation for the work, and no penalty for its neglect; another which appropriates to certain charities fines which it omits to impose; another which authorizes the punishment of transportation on any person falsifying a register, half of which is to be shared by the informer! This statute remains unrepealed and unamended. But in 1838 the Civil Registration Act was passed, and the Parochial Registers since that date have lost some of their unique and national, though not their ecclesiastical value. The importance of registers previous to that date remains undiminished.

Mr. Borlase, member for East Cornwall, introduced last session into the House of Commons a Bill for preserving Parish Registers. The method of preservation which he proposes is the removal of every register from its own parish to London, there to be indexed and deposited in a strong room. The transfer of the Scotch Church Books to Edinburgh in 1854, and the Irish Church Books to Dublin in 1870, are cited as precedents. The opportunity for discussing the Bill did not arrive, but in some shape or other it will probably reappear next session.

The arguments in favour of not only the better preservation of, but also of easier reference to, Parochial Registers are unanswerable. They are perishing year by year, and little by little—a name here, a page there; a volume here, a set of volumes there. In their entirety they are, for practical purposes, inaccessible, because they are dispersed in ten thousand different places. The replies of the incumbents to the Parliamentary inquiry in 1831 unfold a dismal tale. Processes of destruction which seem to have no limit are going on everywhere and always, varying in degree but not in kind. Destruc-

tion by damp, by storm, by fire ; loss by carelessness, by fraud ; mutilations and interpolations ; the replies may be summed up in the words that these records are "imperfect," "indistinct," "illegible," and "torn." As time rolls on, the ink grows faint and ever fainter. The care of a succession of faithful incumbents is marred by the carelessness of a single individual. But all authorities agree that the three greatest enemies of the Parochial Registers are fire, fraud, and the gradual fading of the ink. How shall we place them beyond the reach of such mischances ? Is no fraud practised in London ? Are there no fires in London ? Is the metropolitan atmosphere a specific against fading ink ? Let us not forget that half the records of Parliament were destroyed in the fire which consumed the old Houses of Parliament. The axiom of the Fire Insurance Offices is that in a town the risk is increased, because your security depends not only upon your own but upon your neighbour's carefulness. An *undistributed* risk is the very risk which no insurance office will accept. A parochial fire may indeed once in fifty years take away from us a single register, but a single fire in the Record House will take away from us for ever every register. Tested by the simple canons of insurances, the risk to the registers, if collected in London, would be a hundredfold greater than if scattered over the country. These are the main reasons why, for the sake of preservation, we deprecate their removal.

But to an antiquary there is another argument against the spoliation of the country for the enrichment of the capital. "*Genius loci vetat.*" Those parochial records belong to their several parishes. They are often the oldest manuscripts in the place. The parishioners are the persons who mostly desire to refer to them. They or their predecessors paid for them ; for their use they were primarily and chiefly designed ; they have a primary claim to their custody. A journey to London and the expense of a search in a London office would amount to a practical exclusion of parishioners from their own parish books.

We have now stated the objections to the method, not to the principle of Mr. Borlase's Bill. We have also indicated some reasons why Churchmen cannot be satisfied with things as they are.

There is a method of saving our Parochial Records, plain, sufficient, and easy of application. An unreadiness to apply it, is evidence of an indifference which is a national scandal. The plan is to multiply our copies of our registers by printing them, and to facilitate reference to them by indexing them. Sir Thomas Phillips, the antiquary, in his evidence before the Select Committee of 1831, said, "The only way of securing them is by transcript." Since his day we have improved in

the art of printing. Once transcribed, the expense of printing would be trifling; once printed, the mechanical operation of indexing would be small. In Mr. Borlase's Bill, the 7th section provides that "alphabetical indexes shall be made of the names of all persons mentioned in the registers." The simple addition of "and printed," and the simple omission of the section which requires the removal of the originals, would convert the hostility of clergy, Churchmen, and antiquaries into hearty support. Once printed, the registers will be safe for ever. Once indexed, they will be accessible to all. A complete set of the volumes would, of course, be deposited in the Record Office, in Somerset House, in the British Museum, in the University Libraries, in the Registry Office of every diocese. The volume appertaining to each parish would be deposited side by side with the original in the parish chest. Whoever desired to purchase a volume or set of volumes would be able to buy them as easily as if they were sheets of the Ordnance Survey or the Statutes of the Realm.

The only plausible objection which can be urged is the expense. The validity of such an objection must depend upon the value which we as a nation put upon our parochial records. If they are not worth preserving let them perish, as they are perishing every day. When we contemplate the mass of printed rubbish which is daily delivered at the door of every member of Parliament during the session; when we consider the subsidy which is annually paid to Mr. Hansard for reporting verbatim the utterances of the hon. members; when we know that every Bill in Chancery is printed with the evidence for the sake of saving the judges and counsel the trouble of reading manuscripts; when we remember that many thousands a year are devoted to the Historical Manuscript Commission which deals with muniments in the possession of private persons; when we call to mind that the Record Office and its valuable publications are paid for out of the taxes—we think we have produced ample precedents for the annual expenditure of a small sum, say £4,000, towards the publication of the national records contained in the Parochial Registers.

The work may be completed by degrees. First of all, let us print the 5,000 registers which begin before the year 1600; but even this need not be done off-hand. Let them be printed diocese by diocese, or district by district, in the same way as the Ordnance Survey is being gradually completed; but let a beginning be made at once. Those who are nervous about the expense will soon find that more rapid progress will be made than they expected, and that the whole cost will be insignificant. Private societies, like the Harleian, have already solved a practical difficulty by publishing, at their own expense,

several Parochial Registers. Colonel Chester's "Register of Westminster Abbey" is a model for such work. That such an undertaking should have been perfected by a citizen of the United States is in itself a reflection upon ourselves. It might open our eyes to the fact that our Church Records are something more than national, that they are the heirlooms of the English-speaking race in every continent. We owe something to others as well as to ourselves in this matter.

To Churchmen, however, and to the clergy in particular, this subject commends itself in an especial manner, because these records are ecclesiastical records; they are interwoven with the religious life. "The weddings, the christenings, and the burials" of the English people are something more than the civil record of their "births, deaths, and marriages." There is, besides, a human interest, which to philosophers may seem a folly, but which is, nevertheless, a very ancient and a very common weakness, the desire to know and to visit the family birthplace. The Church of England need not be ashamed of gratifying such curiosity. England is the cradle of many nations, and Englishmen have many kinsmen who are not ashamed of their English ancestry. In such sentiment is grounded the tie of family relationship which binds together the Anglo-Norman races of the world. In our Church books, unprinted, unindexed, and scattered over ten thousand places, the proofs of our kinsmanship lie hid.

STANLEY LEIGHTON.



ART. III.—ST. AUGUSTINE ON PREACHING.

THE experience of a great orator is probably of little value to the man endowed with few gifts of eloquence. The speaker on whose utterance the senate, the bar, the popular assembly, or the congregation has waited, hardly knowing the lapse of time, has few secrets which can be conveyed to other men. There are incommunicable gifts of voice, of intonation, of manner, of sympathy, which no analysis can define, and no insight entirely discover. Yet something can be done by which culture can make the man of inferior gifts more clear, more incisive, more sympathetic, and so both more interesting and more useful.

In the fourth book of his "Christian Learning," St. Augustine proposed to himself some helpful instruction of this sort. He connects the subject with the former books already discussed