Joshua Watson and The National Society

Text of the 150th Anniversary Lecture, delivered by Canon Charles Smyth, Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, on the occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Society, on the 12 October 1961

Best layman in England
Joshua Watson, once referred to as "the best layman in England", was an influential Church of England figure in the nineteenth century, and one of the founders of The National Society. A lecture was given in his honour at the Society's 150th anniversary in 1961 and is published below. It provides background information on issues affecting the Church at the time, and describes Watson's work, focusing on his involvement in the founding of the Society.

150th Anniversary lecture
‘An oration delivered by Canon Charles Smyth, Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, on the occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Society, on the Twelfth of October Nineteen hundred and Sixty-one.’

“It is with gratitude and pride, with confidence in the future and with thanksgiving for the past, that the National Church of England celebrates the 150th anniversary of the foundation of The National Society on October 16th, 1811. It is indeed a matter for congratulation that this anniversary has been marked by the publication of a truly admirable Short History of the National Society: 1811-1961 which has been specially written for the occasion by Dr H. J. Burgess and Dr Paul Welsby: in its seventy-five pages it seems to contain all the necessary information and to touch upon all the leading problems; and it is not only a masterpiece of compression, but also - at 2s 6d - a miracle of cheapness. I hope that it will have the circulation that it undoubtedly deserves.

Tribute to teachers
We are assembled here today to honour a great man, a great Society, and a great profession. But since the task assigned to me is simply to speak of "Joshua Watson and the National Society", I had better begin by making the obvious point that it is meaningless to praise the Society without at the same time paying tribute to the teachers - and to the trainers of the teachers - who, under the auspices of the Society, have served the cause of religious education in this country so faithfully and so well during the past century and a half. In Dr Johnson's Lives of the Poets it is said of a somewhat minor celebrity, Sir Richard Blackmore, "and let it be remembered for his honour that to have been once a schoolmaster is the only reproach which all the perspicacity of malice, animated by wit, has ever fixed upon his private life." But Blackmore, like Johnson himself, had been a schoolmaster in a less enlightened age: and I am sure that all the clergy here today would agree with me that, of the many teachers in Church schools with whom we have been associated in our parochial ministry, there are none whom we do not remember with affection and respect. To them, and to their predecessors since the foundation of The National Society, the people of
England owe an immeasurable debt.

Joshua Watson - biography
But foremost in our thoughts today must be the name of Joshua Watson, who, having made a sufficient fortune in the City as a wine merchant and Government contractor during the Napoleonic Wars, retired from business in 1814, at the age of forty-three, in order to devote all his time and energies, for the remainder of his life, to the service of the Church of England; which he continued to do until his death on January 30th, 1855. "He was", wrote Bishop Blomfield of London, "the most remarkable instance I have ever personally known, of a Christian man devoting all the faculties with which God had endowed him, and a very large portion of the means which are more valuable in the world's estimate though not in his, to the promotion of God's glory in His Church. The young men of this generation are but little aware of what the Church of England owes to my venerable friend."

Saving the Church of England
There are few quotations more hackneyed than the words of Dr Arnold, Headmaster of Rugby, in a letter to a member of SPCK in 1932: "The Church as it now stands no human power can save..."
Allowing for the theological truth that the Church at any time stands, not by any human power, but only by the omnipotence of God, it is permissible for historians to ask - as they are now busily engaged in asking - "Who, humanly speaking, did save the Church of England?" For a long time, the conventional answer to this question was: "Mr Keble and the Oxford Movement". But, without underrating the influence of the Oxford Movement in the Church Revival of the nineteenth century, it has now come to be seen that this answer is in fact somewhat unrealistic. At the present time, I think that most historians, taught by Dr Olive Brose and Dr Geoffrey Best, would be more disposed to answer that the Church of England was saved by Sir Robert Peel and Bishop Blomfield and the Ecclesiastical Commission. It should also be recorded that the first half of the nineteenth century was the Golden Age of the Archdeacon, and that the reviving fortunes of the Establishment owed much to the new effiency and zeal of those energetic and dedicated men. Or again, it would be foolish to underestimate the achievements of the Evangelical Revival in the Church of England: the Evangelicals were strong enough to carry through to final victory in the House of Commons, a month or two before Keble preached his Assize Sermon, the Abolition of the Slave Trade and of Slavery in the British Empire, which was Wilberforce's Crowning Mercy; and in the same year (1833) Lord Shaftesbury made his first appearance as the champion of Factory Reform. These things are, to say the least, evidence of vitality in the threatened Church. Nor should we underrate the strength and tenacity of the High Church Party, which gave birth to the Oxford Movement and was eventually transformed by it. Indeed the Tractarians, regarded in a true historical perspective, did much to transform the Church of England, but did very little to preserve it: the Reform Ministry in 1833 was probably unconscious of Mr Keble's Assize Sermon in St Mary's, Oxford, but the Declaration of the Laity, signed by no less than 230,000 heads of families, and presented to the Archbishop of Canterbury, afforded a timely warning of the strength of Church opinion in the country; and the man who organized that Declaration was Joshua Watson.

It would, of course, be too much to claim that Watson was the man who saved the Church of England in its hour of peril: the credit for that achievement, humanly speaking, belongs primarily to Peel and Blomfield. But it is arguable that, without the work that Joshua Watson had already accomplished, they would have found the Church more difficult to save. The Radical case against the Established Church was very much the same as the case of Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell against the monasteries in the sixteenth century: namely, that it was not useful, and performed no services to the community sufficient to justify its wealth. Therefore it should be disestablished and, in great measure, disendowed, and its property taken over by the State to be employed in the best public interest upon the Benthamite principle of utility, and in such ways as national education. But, at a moment when the Church of England, which was supposed to be so rotten and effete,
was engaged upon the heroic and prodigious task of planting a Church school in every parish in the land, you could not seriously pretend that it was doing nothing useful! And it is, I think, a fact of which the significance has not yet been fully realized, that in August 1833 the Whig Government, which in the eyes of Mr Keble appeared so sacrilegious and so anti-clerical, actually rejected a Radical motion which would, in effect, have ended the system of voluntary education and replaced it by a State system centrally organized; and instead voted an annual subsidy to assist the endeavours of the Church to provide for the education of the children of the poorer classes in Great Britain. Had it not been for the enterprise and vision of Joshua Watson in founding The National Society twenty-two years earlier, this could not have happened.

We all know that this was not the only benevolent achievement to Watson's credit, but it was the one that, from a secular point of view, made the most obvious and the most valuable contribution to the well-being of the nation, and to what the Benthamite Radicals called "public utility". His other activities, multifarious as they were, could be regarded as essentially sectarian, and concerned primarily if not exclusively with the interests of the Church of England. (The one exception was the foundation of King's College, London, in 1828, in which he had taken a leading part.)

Watson's other achievements
To us, when we consider the range and the variety of his labours, it may seem incredible that one man could have achieved so much. In 1814 Joshua Watson became Treasurer of SPCK, and increased its annual income to an unprecedented figure; in 1825 he persuaded the Society to hand over its missionary work in India to SPG. The renewed vitality of the latter society, the augmentation of its resources, and the direction of its policy, were principally due to him: he was one of the architects of the rapid expansion of the Colonial Church; and he was a member of the Council of the new Missionary College of St Augustine's, Canterbury, founded in 1845. He was largely instrumental in founding the Incorporated Church Building Society in 1817, and also in persuading the Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, to move Parliament to set up a Commission for Building, and Promoting the Building, of Additional Churches in Populous Places, and to vote £1,500,000 for this purpose. He himself served as a Commissioner under this Church Building Act of 1818, and the work took up a great deal of his time: yet it is on record that he never missed a meeting of SPCK or SPG or of The National Society. In order to provide for the staffing of the new churches, he helped to found the Additional Curates Society, drew up its constitution, and became its first Treasurer: an office which he retained until his eighty-second year. He was also Treasurer of the Clergy Orphan School; and of all the benevolent enterprises with which he was connected, this was perhaps the nearest to his heart.

The best layman in England
It is no wonder that Bishop Lloyd of Oxford said: "I look upon Joshua Watson as the best layman in England". There were indeed at that time few schemes of usefulness conducted on strictly Church principles with which he had not actively associated, or which did not in some way benefit from his extraordinary administrative and financial genius, his indefatigable industry, or his private munificence. Joshua Watson was the indispensable layman of the Church of England in the first half of the nineteenth century; and his services were so manifold and so ubiquitous that William Wordsworth very properly suggested that to the petition in the Litany there should be added after the clause "all Bishops, Priests and Deacons", the words "and also Joshua Watson".

But all these endeavours, however remarkable and heroic, were not the kind of activities that were calculated to impress the Whigs and Radicals in the Reformed House of Commons, who were not prejudiced in favour of the Established Church, and whose impressions of it were coloured by the appropriate section in The Black Book. It was otherwise, however, with "The National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church". They might not care about the principles of the established Church: but they were
extremely interested in promoting the education of the poor, and they could not ignore the fact that The National Society was doing it.

Church schools before Watson

Needless to say, Joshua Watson did not invent Church schools. We must not forget the Middle Ages, or the educational blueprint for Scotland drawn up by John Knox, or the flowering of Protestant philanthropy between the Reformation and the Restoration, or the Charity School Movement in the eighteenth century. It is also noteworthy that in 1808 the Revd Dr Andrew Bell, late of Madras, had published a manifesto entitled A Sketch of a National Institution for training up the children of the Poor. But the decisive factor was the meeting in the summer of 1811 at Watson’s house at Clapton of three friends, all of them associated with the influential High Church group known as the Hackney Phalanx: namely, Watson himself, the Revd Henry Handley Norris, and John Bowles, JP. It was then and there that the scheme for The National Society took shape; and on October 16th the inaugural meeting was held, with the Archbishop of Canterbury in the chair. At this meeting, the purpose of the Society was defined: namely, “That the National Religion should be made the foundation of National Education, and should be the first and chief thing taught to the Poor, according to the excellent Liturgy and Catechism provided by our Church”. The primary objective was “to teach them the doctrine of Religion according to the principles of the Established Church, and to train them to the performance of their religious duties by an early discipline”: the secondary object was “to communicate such knowledge and habits as are sufficient to guide them through life in their proper station”, which meant imparting a limited amount of secular instruction, based upon the monitorial system devised by Dr Andrew Bell.

Regarded in the light of our modern educational system with all the resources of the community behind it, this may seem very inadequate and unenlightened. But, regarded against the background of the widespread ignorance and brutality of the England of the Napoleonic Wars, it can be recognized as a heroic missionary enterprise, financed by private charity, and designed to illuminate the surrounding darkness and to rescue the children of the poor, particularly in the new industrial and manufacturing towns, from heathenism and barbarity.

Denominational and secular rivalry

It is only fair to observe that Watson and his High Church friends were not alone in recognizing the gravity of the situation and the necessity of remedying it by multiplying elementary schools. There was a kind of three-cornered rivalry between the Established Church and Protestant Dissent and Secularist Radicalism. Moreover it was the Evangelicals who, through the Home and Colonial School Society (founded in 1836), took the initiative in starting infant schools. The Committee of The National Society long remained something of a High Church preserve.

References and biographies

But none of this need detract from our admiration for what The National Society accomplished, under the fostering care of Joshua Watson and his associates, to enable the National Church of England to bring up the rising generation in the fear and nurture of the Lord. To read the life of Joshua Watson, whether in the nineteenth-century biography by Archdeacon Churton, or in that fascinating study by Alan Webster, Joshua Watson: the Story of a Layman (published in 1954), is in itself an inspiration. Not less inspiring and evocative are two other histories: The Church's Part in Education, 1833-1941, by C. K. Francis Brown (published in 1942); and Dr H. J. Burgess' Enterprise in Education (published in 1958). These books are a record of self-sacrifice and devotion, especially on the part of the parochial clergy, amid much surrounding apathy and indifference. Mr Brown quotes a Government Report of 1845, in which an Inspector cites as typical the list of subscriptions to a village school in his district: the lord of the manor and principal landowner contributed 3 guineas; six well-to-do farmers gave 5s each, and one gave 10s; the rector gave £17 10s 0d, his wife gave a guinea, and a personal friend of the rector gave 5 guineas. Time and time again, it fell upon the parson to make up the deficit on the year’s working if the school was not to
be closed down. These old school buildings have long been out of date: but the self-sacrifice and devotion and hard work by which they were erected and maintained invest them with a glory and a radiance which can never fade.

It is necessary - and it was perhaps never more urgently necessary than in the days of the Parliament of the Reform Bill - that the Church should appear to the world to be useful. Needless to say, to justify itself to the world can never be the Church's primary objective. It is the judgement of God that matters: not the judgment of men.

But it is the task of the Church in every century to serve its generation according to the will of God. And it was the vision of Joshua Watson, that devoted layman, that enabled him to perceive, and to convince others, that in the year 1811 this meant the founding of The National Society for the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church. Conditions have greatly changed since then, but The National Society has always adapted itself to them while remaining true to the purpose for which it was founded 150 years ago. In the whole field of education, there is nothing more vitally important than the inculcation and the apprehension of Religious Truth. In that conviction, and with a sense of gratitude and obligation to the memories of all who have laboured in this cause, and are now at rest, we honour Joshua Watson and The National Society!