

Radicalism versus Evangelicalism in Victorian Cheltenham

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In his recent work on radicalism in Gloucestershire, with particular reference to Cheltenham during the period 1832–47, Dr. O.R. Ashten maintains that it was the opposition of the incumbent of Cheltenham parish church, the Rev Francis Close, to the disparate elements — working class Chartists, Owenite Socialists and middle-class radicals — which caused them to unite as an unholy coalition against the establishment, whether it be employers, magistrates or clergy.¹

Yet while much new material has come to light in the research, many of the underlying assumptions and evaluation of the situation in Victorian Cheltenham need to be challenged. Much of the problem is the failure to understand the nature of Evangelicalism in the Church of England, and the character of the leader of that party in Cheltenham. The research of the Rev Geoffrey Berwick has misled subsequent historians, and his distorted impression of Francis Close (1797–1882), perpetual curate of Cheltenham parish church between 1826 and 1856, reveal more about Berwick's Anglo-Catholic prejudice and misjudgment than about Evangelicalism.² From a different perspective, Ashten creates an impression which is a misreading of Close and his theological position. But Berwick and Ashten are not the first to misunderstand the nature of Evangelicalism in the Church of England, and the complex personality of Francis Close.

Ashten's impression is that Close was 'a Tory Evangelical cleric'³ who, through his despotic rule impressed his 'inquisitorial control of Cheltenham life'.⁴ All aspects of the social and religious life of the town were confined by 'the straight-jacket of Evangelicalism'.⁵ Close attempted to obtain class control and indoctrination of the population through the erection of churches, the provision of schools, bible classes for working men, and the formation of charitable bodies. He publically opposed Chartism — notably in the two sermons preached to the Chartists assembled in the parish church in August 1839⁶ — and in 1842 was instrumental in causing

the arrest and prosecution for blasphemy of the freethinker, George Jacob Holyoake.

But this impression of Cheltenham is far too narrow, and should be set against a wider context, of the Evangelical character of the town which extended over a period of one hundred years from the end of the Napoleonic wars to the first world war. An Evangelical ministry was exercised at the parish church by a succession of incumbents, notably Charles Jervis,⁷ Francis Close,⁸ and Edward Walker. Of these three, the most outstanding was Francis Close, who had been converted to faith in Christ in 1813, and having come under the influence of Evangelicals at Hull and Cambridge, expressed in his own ministry the principles of Charles Simeon.

Simeon was one of the second generation of Evangelicals in the Church of England in the eighteenth century, and represented a moderate Calvinistic theology. During the course of his fifty-four year ministry as vicar of Holy Trinity church, Cambridge between 1782 and 1836, he established a movement with its own distinctive theology, loyal to the principles of the established church, and committed to reaching men and women at home and overseas for Christ. To solve 'the problem of continuity' of a succession of Evangelical ministers, in important centres, Simeon acquired the right of presentation to twenty one livings, in spas like Cheltenham and Bath, and in urban centres like Derby and Bradford (later both of these became cathedrals). Simeon's philosophy was simple:

'There is this difference between myself and others: they purchase *income* — I purchase *spheres*, wherein the prosperity of the established church, and the kingdom of our blessed Lord, may be advanced; and not for a season only, but if it please God, in perpetuity also'.¹⁰

The patronage of Cheltenham was purchased in 1816 for £3000, and Close was appointed by Simeon in 1826. During Close's residence in Cheltenham, the population increased from 13,396 in 1821 to over 35,051 in 1851. The steady transformation of the town during this period from spa to educational centre, has to be seen in the light of the rise of Close to a position of unrivalled leadership, and the adoption by a large proportion of the resident population of the town to Evangelical faith and principles.

Close's concern was to reach *all* social classes for Christ, and churches and schools were erected and schemes of social relief implemented with that aim in mind. The direct outcome of lives committed to God and transformed by Christ had a profound effect on the whole of society. The research of Dr K. Heasman¹¹ has shown the impact of Evangelicalism on social work, and Dr I.

Bradley,¹² the impact upon the upper classes, where for example, there was a

‘marked decline in race-going, in attendance at theatres and other entertainments, and the closing down of several gaming clubs and pleasure gardens through lack of custom’.¹³

This transformation was obvious in Cheltenham over the issue of Sunday observance. Sabbatarianism was stressed because it provided both a preparation and a foretaste of the afterlife. Close, together with most of the other Anglican and Nonconformist ministers of Cheltenham held such strongly-held Sabbatarian principles that it was said that Cheltenham as ‘assumed a more sober, discreet, quiet and religious appearance than any other town in England, or . . . the United Kingdom’.¹⁴ The *whole* community — rich and poor — should *enjoy* the Sabbath. The Cheltenham Society for the Prevention of the Desecration of the Sabbath (f1839); enabled shopworkers to have at least one day off work each week. Close encouraged his congregation to walk to church rather than hire carriages, and he expressed his concern for postmen and milkmen who were expected to work. Opposition to Sunday trains was to preserve both the peace of the town and to prevent it from becoming ‘a mere tea garden . . . by the idlers and Sabbath breakers of Birmingham, Droitwich, Bromsgrove and Worcester’.¹⁵

Close was supported in his views by most of the Anglican clergy in the town, as well as by a large proportion of the residents. Some of the leading individuals, like Close and John Browne, the minister of Holy Trinity church, and retired army officers, were dubbed by their opponents as ‘the Lieutenant General Close Brigade’, whose rule was regarded as being nothing less than ‘the slavery of the blackcoats’.¹⁶ A warmer assessment was made in an illuminated address presented to Close on leaving the town in 1856.

‘We would express our admiration of the astonishing energy of your character, and the attractive geniality of your temperament, and we believe that many who at a distance may have viewed your opinions with suspicion and distrust, would, if brought into personal communication with yourself, have entertained very different sentiments towards you’.¹⁷

Ashten over estimates the number of those who opposed Close and the significance of the opposition in relation to Close’s other concerns. Apart from the opposition of the activities of the

dissolute Colonel William Berkeley and his circle, the combined Unitarian and radical freethinking opposition was a small, insignificant minority of the resident population of the town.

In Close's own estimation, of the five hundred male Chartists who attended the parish church in August 1839, over one hundred were not from Cheltenham. This is a similar number to that of the three hundred and forty-eight individuals who in 1837 signed a petition in favour of secular education. What is clear from Ashten is that the Cheltenham Chartists were supported by those from other local centres of Chartism in Cirencester, Stroud and Gloucester. While there were no more than some five hundred Chartists in Cheltenham, Close could rely upon support from a minimum of the 1200 strong congregation of the parish church (which included a number of shopkeepers and working class) to the 13,000 who in 1837 signed a petition in favour of having a daily reading of scripture in schools. This last figure represented almost half of the resident population in 1841. Even over the vexed question of the payment of the church rate (which was hardly a 'radical' issue, but which would have gained radical support), the highest recorded number of those who opposed the rate was 1050 in 1845. Support for Close's position can be seen in 1864 (eight years after he had left the town), when Holyoake was again opposed by Cheltenham residents over giving a lecture.

Ashten traces the progress of radicalism in Cheltenham; it was absent before 1831, socialism had disappeared by 1845, and Chartism by the mid-1850s. The last Chartist meeting was held in Cheltenham in August 1856, only a few months before Close left to become dean of Carlisle. The radical cause was actively supported by the *Cheltenham Free Press* (f1834); by the congregation of about one hundred at the Unitarian Chapel; and by those who attended the Mechanics' Institute. However, Ashten overstates both the influence of the radical cause in the town, and Close's opposition to it. A far greater threat to Evangelicalism was Romanism, and from 1835 Close and Brown were active in their condemnation of that movement within the Church of England, and as expressed in the Church of Rome.

Ashten is wrong over Close's attitude to dissent and to education. To maintain that both Simeon and Close did not oppose dissent on theological grounds, but from fear that it was not tied to the *status quo* and wanted reform, is unsupported. Close opposed radical dissent (and Unitarianism) because it was unscriptural, and the independency of nonconformity, but was prepared to actively co-operate with dissenters in matters of common concern —

Sabbath observance, the British and Foreign Bible Society, the YMCA and opposition to Romanism. Close encouraged co-operation:

'Let us cordially fraternise with the religious dissenters — separating them from the political democrats of the day — let all bible-loving, bible-believing, bible-reading Christians unite together against Rome . . . we must shake hands on the common ground of God's truth against the world'.¹⁸

Close believed that an exclusively secular education was wrong, and the aim was 'scriptural education on the principles of the established church'.¹⁹

Church and state should co-operate in educational matters, since 'education conducted on Christian principles, is one of the greatest blessings that a people can receive, or a government impart'.²⁰ Part of the purpose of education was to prepare individuals for this world and the next. Well-qualified Evangelical teachers were needed for the schools, and a bible-based education would protect the middle and working classes from the twin evils of secularism and Romanism. Therefore, against Ashten, Close was *not* in favour of Sunday schools, because he deplored their poor standards, and he was *against* the National Society because it propagated Romanism. Close believed that if Christians did not educate the poor, then they would be led astray by 'knaves, traitors and Chartists'.²¹ Education was not just to consist of bible teaching, as Ashten maintains, but scientific teaching was also to be given. Ashten is quite prepared to criticise the provision of Evangelical schools, and to welcome radical ones; but if radicals could provide schools, then why not Christians?

Close's views did change over alcohol; but again a wider context is essential in order to understand his position. Ashten correctly observes that Close, like most other Anglican ministers, did not support the tee-total movement because of its association with Chartism. In 1848 Close maintained that he could not be induced to become a total abstainer; but on moving to Carlisle he adopted total abstinence. This radical change of heart may well have been caused through the disability of gout from which he suffered, but he maintained that it was through his better acquaintance with the working classes. Close threw himself into the new cause. Of his eight publications between 1860 and 1862, four were devoted to total abstinence. He also became president of the Church of England Total Abstinence Society (f1862).

During Close's thirty year ministry at Cheltenham 'parish church,

the town was transformed from a fashionable, yet declining watering place, in to an important educational centre and setting for exhibitions and conferences. How Cheltenham would have developed without Francis Close as its leading citizen is mere speculation. But what is perfectly clear is that 'his history and the history of the town are one'.²² Any analysis of Close's leadership and philosophy which regards him as a power-hungry despotic cleric concerned with maintaining the *status quo* fails to understand the nature of the man, and of his strongly held Evangelical convictions.

Notes

¹ O.R. Ashten, *Radicalism and Chartism in Gloucestershire 1832-1847*, unpublished Ph D thesis, University of Birmingham 1980.

² G.T. Berwick, *Close of Cheltenham parish pope. A study in the Evangelical background to the Oxford Movement*, unpublished typescript in Cheltenham public library, 1938.

G.T. Berwick, *Close of Cheltenham, parish pope*, *Theology*, Vol 39, (September and October 1939), pp. 193-201, 276-285.

³ Ashten, op. cit., xi.

⁴ Ibid., 256.

⁵ Ibid., 375.

⁶ F. Close, *The Chartists' visit to the parish church. A sermon addressed to the Chartists of Cheltenham, Sunday 18 August 1839, on the occasion of their attending the parish church in a body* (1839); *The Female Chartists' visit to the parish church. A sermon addressed to the female Chartists of Cheltenham, Sunday 25 August 1839, on the occasion of their attending the parish church in a body* (1839).

⁷ A.F. Munden, 'Evangelical in the shadows: Charles Jervis of Cheltenham', *Churchman*, Vol 96, No 2 (1982), pp. 142-150.

⁸ M. Hennell, *Sons of the Prophets, Evangelical leaders of the Victorian church*, (1979), pp. 104-121.

⁹ C. Smyth, *Simeon and church order, a study of the origins of the Evangelical revival in Cambridge in the eighteenth century* (Cambridge 1940), p. 310.

¹⁰ W. Carus, *Memoirs of the life of the Rev Charles Simeon MA* (1847), p. 780.

¹¹ K. Heasman, *Evangelicals in Action, an appraisal of their social work in the Victorian era* (1962).

¹² I. Bradley, *The call to seriousness, the Evangelical impact on the Victorians* (1976).

¹³ Ibid., p. 106.

¹⁴ *Cheltenham Journal*, 19 February 1844, p. 2.

¹⁵ *Cheltenham Journal*, 14 September 1840, p. 2.

¹⁶ *Cheltenham Free Press*, 25 December 1847, p. 408.

¹⁷ *Address from his parishioners and friends to the Very Reverend Francis Close, Dean of Carlisle, Presented 3 December 1856.*

¹⁸ F. Close, 'Missions: Protestant and Popish' (Liverpool 1851), p. 31.

¹⁹ F. Close, *A sermon preached in the parish church of St Mary, Cheltenham, on Thursday, 5 November 1840* (1840), p. 16.

²⁰ *National Education and Church Extension. An authentic report of the speeches*

delivered at a public meeting of members and friends of the established church . . . 9 February 1839 pp. 78-79.

²¹ F. Close, *Co-operation with the Committee of Council on Education vindicated and recommended* (1848), p. 51.

²² *Cheltenham Free Press*, 23 December 1882, p. 2.