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978-0-521-14303-5 - Temporal Pillars: Queen Anne's Bounty, the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, and the Church of England

G. F. A. Best

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

Within the past two hundred and fifty years (not to mention any longer period) both the ends pursued by the Church of England and the means by which it has sought to attain them have been greatly changed. It would be surprising if this were not so, since everything else that matters most in the life of the nation, its economy, its social structure, its political habits, has been revolutionized in the same period of time; but the fact is worth emphasizing all the same, because so many of the cherished beliefs and traditions of the loyal Church of England man tend to obscure it. The reforms in ecclesiastical administration (dominant among them the institution of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners), the rise of new church parties, changed fashions of church building, decoration and services, are not the only and perhaps not the most fundamental changes that have taken place. They are only, so to speak, internal changes. More radical in the long run, though far less swift and conspicuous in any one generation, are the changes in the Church of England's external relations, in its social and constitutional status.

About 1700, the Church of England was much more than a church in the strict, religious sense of the word. It was a political institution and a social institution as well; its possessions, its ubiquity, its history, combined to make it dominant, head, shoulders and body, among the other institutions of the state. Its standing in society at large was further secured by the nature of its ideological environment, for at that time the idea of God was (in sharp contrast to the present time) a real one to the great majority of men, commonly entertained by the adult mind, inevitably instilled into the child, so naturally and easily that it seemed intuitive. Certain of the protestant dissenters objected that this God was not best served by an established church, but they were few in number. There seems to be no doubt that to most men the idea of a religious establishment came with no more difficulty than the idea of God Himself. Not until after the middle of the century did any substantial bodies of opinion gather to support the dissenters' arguments, or to assert, what was hardly yet mentionable in public at the beginning of the century, that establishments of religion were wrong because religion itself was a

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fraud. In 1700, religion was still an element in which the greater part of the nation breathed naturally. It moreover still provided (as it had done since the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons) the common framework of ideas about law and society. Political and other 'secular' disputes almost inevitably took on some religious savour, partly, doubtless, because causes looked (as they still do look) better if they could sail under Christian colours, but partly also because few causes then could ever be wholly either 'secular' or 'spiritual'; the distinction was not clear, outside libraries of divinity; every topic of social and political interest brought religious connexions and implications in its wake. It is not surprising therefore that the Church of England, towering over the few other visible churches and dominant among the various 'establishments' of the state, the repository of the national faith, should have been accepted also as a natural apapanage of politics, as the cement of society and the censor of morals. It is not surprising either, that its material circumstances and working efficiency should have been matters of keenest interest to other influential persons besides the upper clergy.

'Church reform' is a subject which in the middle of the twentieth century need worry none but churchmen; it has become their private affair. 'Church reform' in the eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries, however, concerned everybody, and its fate was settled in the national legislature. It is as instruments of church reform that both Queen Anne's Bounty and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners come into English history. Incomparable though they were in scale (for the Bounty began as, and long remained, a very small concern), their lives ran through similar courses. Each was founded to promote a particular measure of church reform, each stayed on to carry many burdens other than those for which it was originally designed, and each became a permanent administrative department. Each was conceived in a time of religious revival and political excitement and bore marks of parenthood which ensured it the hostility of certain elements in society. Mainly as a result of the opposition, each was substantially modified within a few decades of its beginning, and put upon a less controversial, and possibly a less effective, footing.

Between them, they saw the Church of England through several revolutions. With the theological revolutions, and with the rise and fall of church parties during the period in question, they were only in-

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directly concerned. With the thorough-going reforms in the church's administration, however, they became much involved, at both the giving and the receiving end. For the revolutions in the church's territorial and financial organization, which transformed the virtually medieval system of 1700 into something recognizably up-to-date and fairly serviceable by the end of the nineteenth century, they had much direct responsibility.

These revolutions in the life and structure of the church itself ran alongside a complete change in its relations with the state and with society. The character of its establishment changed; men came to look on it with different eyes, and to dare to attack it, in the course of the nineteenth century, as on the whole they did not dare in the eighteenth; the kind of justifications offered for its establishment were not the same in 1850 as in 1750, and were different again by 1950. The Church of England in 1700 had a pronouncedly political character. This was taken to be quite natural and proper by all except the Independents, Baptists, Quakers and remoter sectarians, whose views, however interesting and perhaps alarming they might appear on paper, could generally be ignored in practice. The Whigs, who ought not, if they had followed the views of their preceptor Locke, to have set much store on an establishment, showed no signs of wishing to undo it. Their prize preacher, Hoadly, taught the complete irrelevance of all visible churches whatever; but this did not prevent him from picking the ripest plums his own church had to offer. The truth is, that the established church was far too important a part of the political and social structure of the country for any man of property, not committed by religious scruples to dissent, lightly to abandon. Politicians wrangled over its appointments: if they were on the side of the administration, they deplored the disloyalty of those clergymen who sympathized with the opposition; if they were on the opposition side, they would say that the church was being prostituted by the men in power. This was all very unpleasant, perhaps unspiritual. Some really pious clergy, whether they inclined to any or none of the existing parties, were apt to regret these concomitants of establishment. But there was no point in disputing the propriety of establishment itself. Politicians would not, and most men who cared for the political stability of the nation could not, do without it.

In the course of the nineteenth century the Church of England, like the

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civil service, was to a considerable degree taken out of politics. Most of the many preferments in the Crown's gift came to be given for reasons additional to political ones. Party still came into it, but it was often ecclesiastical party, as prime ministers tried to strengthen the one they thought more helpful, or to placate each in turn. On the one hand it became increasingly *infra dig.* for ministers of the Crown to appoint the ecclesiastically unworthy; on the other, the structure of politics was so changing that little advantage could be gained from appointing for political reasons; and the purity of the church gained both ways.

The other great reform in which Queen Anne's Bounty and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners participated was a social one. The reforms in the church's territorial organization and financial administration were not important for its own internal prosperity alone. The changes wrought between 1700 and 1880, in the way parishes were actually run, churches built or repaired, and clergy paid, were of much larger importance, because to begin with all these mundane matters, small individually but together of the very essence of the church's life and character, were spread about the social scene in a higgledy-piggledy confusion, inextricable from the ordinary concerns of the laity. Gradually the church's rights and properties were sorted out and put in a separate compartment. This was a gigantic work, and it was effected to some degree by Queen Anne's Bounty, but mainly by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, who thus assisted in a national social change of, over the decades, revolutionary proportions. A vast acreage of church property, mixed up all over the country with lay property, and more than twenty thousand buildings, were transferred from the management of nearly as many individuals, and the ivy-like clutches of the ancient local authorities, to the ultimate control of a single body of statutory commissioners. This great change has been accompanied by the conversion of an indescribably complicated system of laws and customs into a simple set of office regulations. It has put order into chaos, and made orderly and useful that which was irresponsible, inefficient and unpredictable.

The reform of the national church: the modification of its relations with the state: the transition from a medieval to the modern pattern of law and local government: it is with these organic changes in the structure of English life and institutions in mind that the history of Queen Anne's Bounty and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners must be read.

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It is a remarkable fact that palpable inefficiency and failure to do its work properly, by the standards of the more conscientious of each successive generation, have been almost continuously characteristic of the Church of England ever since the Reformation.<sup>1</sup> It is even more remarkable, that although the causes of the inefficiency remained perfectly clear and constant, nothing effective was done to right them between the reigns of Elizabeth and Victoria. Historians have not failed to pay proper attention to these material defects, charting their causes and consequences in the successive accepted phases of our national history, but no one seems yet to have considered the persistence of these defects through so long a period of years as a phenomenon in itself. Surely it is at least superficially astonishing, that while the governing classes of the nation never ceased to proclaim their loyalty to the Church of England and their reliance upon its establishment, reforming prelates found exactly the same things wrong, recommended much the same reforms, and died without achieving them, generation after generation. 'Scarce any of our most Gracious Kings and Queens from the Reformation,' wrote Erasmus Saunders in 1721, 'scarce any of our wisest and best Patriots in every Reign, who have not express'd a tender Concern for them.'<sup>2</sup> But nothing was done. Whitgift's list of admitted defects was no different from Laud's. Burnet and Gibson found things no better, and their *agenda* could have been adopted *in toto* a century later by Bishops Blomfield and Kaye, in whose generation at last real reforms were made. Little of lasting value or vital effect was done between Whitgift's days and Blomfield's. The first church reform movement was doomed from the start by its involvement in politics. The second faded out with the coming of the Hanoverians, leaving a few institutions of which the least inadequate was Queen Anne's Bounty. Only the third movement for church reform really got anywhere, through the founding of an institution to conduct church reform as its regular, full-time, business. The institution in question was that of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners.

Sometimes one suspects that historians, writing about institutions old

<sup>1</sup> With the medieval period I am not concerned, but I believe that the church was open to much the same kind of material criticisms before the sixteenth century as after.

<sup>2</sup> *View of the State of Religion in the Diocese of St David's* (new edition, 1949), p. 99.

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and vanished, must see them less as they really were than did contemporaries who knew them when the blood still ran warm in their veins. Of Queen Anne's Bounty and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, I do not think this is necessarily the case. The modern ecclesiastical and social historians who have remarked upon their activities (and many have done so) seem to have understood their general characters perfectly well, better, often, than they were understood in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sheer physical difficulties such as the slow transmission of news, the expense and hazard of travelling, the decrepitude of ecclesiastical administration, kept the workings of Queen Anne's Bounty mysterious to many of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century clergy; in Victoria's reign the facts and figures relative to the two bodies in question were not difficult to come by but misunderstandings still clouded their public standing—misunderstandings with roots deep in political or religious party prejudice, much more damaging and difficult to shift than misunderstandings based on ignorance alone, and much more proof against the arguments of statesmen and Blue Books. My researches have produced nothing very unexpected, little that will alter in any important respect what is regularly said of them in books about the English church and clergy; in this respect, I have simply been able to construct out of the great mass of material available a larger, deeper and I hope more colourful picture of what they did and how they did it.

It is perhaps strange, that two such bodies, whose general position in history is so well known and the materials for whose histories have not been difficult of access, should have escaped detailed investigation until within the last ten years. It seems to have needed their demise as separate entities in 1948 before either was accorded the dignity of anything in hard covers, although gritty little official histories of each had been published just after the First World War<sup>1</sup> and Sir James Brown published at the end of the Second an admirably readable and comprehensive sketch of the Commissioners' history.<sup>2</sup> Then came two works, to each of which I owe much. In 1955 Mr Alan Savidge published his monograph *The*

<sup>1</sup> L. T. Dibdin and S. E. Downing, *The Ecclesiastical Commission, a sketch of its History and Work* (1919), and W. R. Le Fanu, *Queen Anne's Bounty: a sketch of its History and Work* (1921). F. G. Hughes's revised edition of the latter was published in 1933.

<sup>2</sup> *Number One, Millbank: the Story of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners* (1944).

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*Foundation and Early Years of Queen Anne's Bounty.* Little can be added to what he has written on the subject, and my own briefer account of the period 1700–36 is based very largely on his. It is a great pleasure to acknowledge the excellence of his book and the unfailing kindness with which he has received my applications for help over the past five years and allowed me to use his book; from which I have taken most of the factual detail in chapters I and III about the Bounty's foundation and early history. The other work to which I refer remains unpublished: the Oxford doctorate thesis of Dr F. M. G. Willson (formerly of Nuffield College, at present at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland), *A Consideration of the Experience, in Britain, of Administrative Commissions represented in Parliament by non-Ministerial Commissioners, with special reference to the Ecclesiastical Commission, the Charity Commission and the Forestry Commission.* It is deposited in the Bodleian Library, and I have availed myself so freely of his permission to use it that a good deal of what I say about the Ecclesiastical Commissioners' constitutional problems during their first half-century is drawn from his analysis and conclusions; in which however I have not always concurred. I must let this statement of my general debt stand in place of more detailed acknowledgments in the notes to chapters VIII and IX. One other book there is that treats the Commissioners (in their early years) with care and respect—Olive J. Brose's *Church and Parliament: the Reshaping of the Church of England, 1828–1860*, published in 1959; but of that I need say little here, since the bulk of my own work on the period and topics of our overlap was done before hers came out. We have inevitably used much of the same material. Not so inevitably, some of our conclusions and 'interpretations' are very similar: compare, for instance, our accounts of the constitutional revolution of 1828–32, and of the importance of Peel and Blomfield.<sup>1</sup> In our views of the origins of the Commissioners, however, and our analyses of the general character and problems of the third church reform movement, we differ greatly.

Outside the parts of the subject where Mr Savidge and Dr Willson have anticipated me, I have drawn mainly from 'primary' sources in as much detail as the nature of the task has demanded, and time and material made possible. Obviously I have not examined every source of

<sup>1</sup> Chapter V to VIII below, *passim*, and my article on the former and its consequences for the established church in *Theology*, LXII (1959), 226 ff.

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any degree of relevance. The institutions in question cover nearly two hundred and fifty years of history; they have always been more or less prominent in the life of the English Church through these years, have often excited the minds and even passions of the nation's legislators and judges, and have now and then been dragged from their cool and sequestered official vales of life into the noisy world of newspaper headlines and questions in the House. Scarcely a year of the nineteenth century passed without a parliamentary paper about them; they were the subject of debates in the Convocations and the Church Assembly as well as Parliament, they entered the discussions of diocesan synods, conferences and societies in that busy world of local politics and endeavour of whose share in the Victorian achievement we are still far too ignorant. Not only newspapers and well-known periodicals like the *Quarterly* and *Church Quarterly Reviews* reviewed their activities, but also the myriad and (often) short-lived organs of ecclesiastical zeal and prejudice which line the 'dead periodicals' shelves of large old libraries in a dusty silence peculiarly alien to their producers. Ever since the eighteen-forties their work has been familiar to every clergyman and many pious laymen, a surprisingly large proportion of whom, as one recognizes with a kind of weary admiration, became articulate in book, pamphlet, or letter. Their collected records in the offices of the Church Commissioners at Millbank, though incomplete (especially as regards the Bounty) are, as may easily be imagined, voluminous.

It is doubtful whether a Mabillon or a Mommsen, or even one as industrious as 'Castell, Professor at Cambridge, who, during seventeen years, accounted that day a holiday in which he did not employ from sixteen to eighteen hours upon his gigantic works',<sup>1</sup> would have felt it necessary to go through all that *might* throw up something of relevance from this fathomless mine. Certainly I have not been through a ten-thousandth part of what lies there; but most of it is either matter of legal record or routine business, and I believe, after having searched and sifted it with the help of men whose working lives are passed in its company, that nothing of importance to the main theme of this book remains to be discovered there.

If those parts of the book dealing with the internal history of Queen Anne's Bounty and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners are mainly based on

<sup>1</sup> Pusey, *Remarks upon the prospective and past benefits of Cathedral Institutions*, p. 53.



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'primary' sources (in which I include parliamentary papers and debates), the same claim cannot be made in respect of all the parts which are meant to put them into their natural context and to assess their ultimate significance. These two institutions were central to the administrative machinery of the established church. They mattered a great deal in the life of the church. They mattered in a yet larger field, in the life of the nation as a whole, in proportion as the church itself mattered; and for many of the decades under discussion, the Church mattered a very great deal. Of the Church of England in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, its establishment was the grandest single feature. The Church of England's character was mainly determined for the greater part of those centuries by the fact of its establishment; which meant, not whatever theory of establishment might be put forward to explain or justify it, but the whole framework of laws, traditions, usages and (so far as one can detect them) assumptions that in fact made up its establishment at any given moment. This was the setting in which most Englishmen before, say, 1870, were familiar with the Church of England. It mattered in the ordinary course of life to a degree now to many people incredible; it lay inescapably across the workaday paths of the lawyer, the politician, the magistrate, the farmer and his labourer; it could scarcely be avoided by the man of property, the ratepayer, the lover, the father, and the corpse.

I have only managed to place my history of Queen Anne's Bounty and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners into this huge setting by enlisting the aid, and standing often on the shoulders, of others. Whether this has led to shallowness or misrepresentation is for my critics to say; I have preferred to risk going wrong on the right lines to staying safe on what would have been, I think, the wrong ones.

One other feature of the book needs to be explained. Its texture is not consistent all the way through. The period from the seventeen-seventies to the eighteen-seventies is treated in greater depth and detail than the periods before or after. This is simply because that period was so crucial in both the history of the Church of England and the development of English society. If one is trying to study the two together and to mark their interrelations, those years assume an air of paramount importance. Inevitably also, they were years of particular interest for the history of Queen Anne's Bounty and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. The

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Bounty Board came then to have a greater proportionate share in the life of the church than it had done previously or was ever to do again, and the Commissioners did their greatest work, and laid the foundations of all their subsequent labours, in their first, vigorous, and controversial half-century. The period enclosed by the birth of Blomfield and the death of Tait forms the heart of my book. As to the last period, from the eighteen-eighties to 1948, I admit at once the relatively sketchy and limited nature of my treatment, especially on the economic and financial developments. Yet the work of both institutions became ever more heavy and complex and the problems with which they had to grapple were often awkward and interesting. Historians of the twentieth-century church will find in my last chapter many gaps, and as many invitations to fill them.