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JOHN VENN AND THE CHURCH MISSIONARY SOCIETY

THE year 1799 can hardly have seemed propitious for the founding of a missionary society. For six years England had been at war with revolutionary France and was getting the worst of it. The name Napoleon Bonaparte was already in use as a bogey to frighten disobedient children and only a year earlier the threat of invasion had been so strong that Volunteer Associations were being formed on Home Guard lines to fight invaders. John Venn had written to his friend Edward Edwards on April 11, 1798, "The French will, it is expected, make their attacks on all points at once, on Holland, on Rochefort, for the army of England extends so far. As it is impossible that all these bodies can be intercepted by our ships some must reach us and land upon our coasts."[1]

It was true that Napoleon was now in Egypt dreaming of an Eastern empire that would rival that of Alexander the Great, but there was still the possibility that he might suddenly return to Western Europe and put earlier plans into operation. At home Pitt's repressive domestic policy had clamped down on all political clubs, Habeas Corpus had been suspended and the Trade Unions were being made illegal by the Combination Acts; harvests were poor and the price of bread higher than ever before. Added to this the clergy who were gathered together on April 12, 1799, at the Castle and Falcon, Aldersgate Street, were men of no standing in the Church; only three of them were beneficed; they were supported by no bishop, and it took them over a year to obtain any recognition from Archbishop

[1] J. Venn to E. Edwards, April 11, 1798 (MS.). He must have meant "from" Holland and "from" Rochefort, as these places were both in French hands.

Moore of Canterbury and his episcopal colleagues. They were scorned in the Church and in society as "Enthusiasts", as men who, like the Jacobins and Methodists, carried things a good deal too far. It is for this reason that they were unable at first to reinvigorate the missionary enthusiasm of the earlier Anglican societies, the S.P.C.K. and the S.P.G.

The original ideas that led to the formation of C.M.S. go well back before 1799. They lie in the thoughts and efforts of Charles Grant in India and later in England, and in the discussions of Evangelical clerical societies in this country, especially in those of the Eclectic Society in London; in all these discussions one figure stands out—Charles Simeon.

The story of Grant's conversion in 1776 has already been told. Soon, the chief preoccupation of his mind became the promotion of a large-scale Protestant mission to India. Although the East India Company sent out their own chaplains, these had no responsibility for evangelization of Indians; however, something was being done in this direction in the south. In 1706 the S.P.G. gave generous support to a Danish mission in Tranquebar, but was unable, because of its Charter, to send missionaries to a country which was not at the time a colonial dependency of Great Britain. From 1726 the S.P.C.K. took over some responsibility and employed German and Danish missionaries in Lutheran orders, of whom the most famous were Schwartz and Kiernander.

In 1758 Kiernander arrived in Calcutta, having been expelled by the French from the Madras Presidency. In Calcutta he married a wealthy English widow and with her money built a church, a school and a cemetery. After her death he squandered her money and by 1787 his property was for sale. Grant bought the church, the school and the cemetery for ten thousand rupees, enrolled his friends William Chambers and David Brown as fellow-trustees, and made the property over to the S.P.C.K., who were asked to supply a missionary at once. This, strange to say, the S.P.C.K. were able to do and the Rev. A. T. Clarke arrived in 1789; thus the first Anglican ordained missionary arrived three years before the Baptists, Carey and Thomas. Unfortunately Clarke proved unsatisfactory and stayed only a few months. When he left, David Brown became minister

at the "Old Church" as it was now called, and with a brief interlude remained there till his death in 1812. This church became the centre of Evangelical influence in India.

David Brown was a Yorkshireman and a former pupil of Joseph Milner's; in 1782 he went up to Magdalene College, Cambridge, and soon became a friend of Simeon.[1] In his second year he was introduced to a major on leave from India who was looking for a married chaplain for the Military Orphan School in Calcutta.[2] Brown was neither married nor ordained but thought that both requirements could be met and accepted the job. To find a bishop who would accept him for ordination for work overseas proved more difficult than finding a wife to go with him. The Bishop of London declined his overtures, and it was only after considerable delay that the unjustly notorious Bishop Watson of Llandaff ordained him in 1785. Meanwhile he had made friends with Cecil and Newton, both of whom were willing to offer him curacies if his plans failed. With these men and with Simeon he maintained a considerable correspondence, thus forming the original link between Grant's circle in India and the Eclectic Society in England.

The other trustee of the "Old Church", William Chambers, was related to Grant by marriage and was a friend of Schwartz; he was a distinguished orientalist whose translation of parts of St. Matthew's Gospel into Persian was discussed at early C.M.S. Committees. George Udny, Grant's assistant, and later his successor at Malda, also shared this concern for missions.

Just over a year after Brown's arrival in Calcutta his name appeared, together with those of Grant, Chambers, and Udny, as a signatory to a document entitled "A proposal for establishing a Protestant Mission in Bengal and Behar". In this it was asserted that the only hope of good government in India lay in a reformation of Indian moral standards, and to bring this about missionaries were required. The authors proposed that British Bengal and Behar should be divided into eight parts with an ordained missionary in each, who was to be given a

[1] Brown was four years John Venn's junior so would have missed him both at school and at Cambridge.

[2] This was a Charity School in Calcutta, built by Kiernander to provide for the children of soldiers who died in India, whether born of European or native mothers. Officers had pay deducted at source to finance this establishment.

small plot of land for his house, school and church. The scheme envisaged a mission sponsored by the State and aimed at securing the support of the Government and of the East India Company.

Copies of the Proposal were sent to the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of Llandaff, the Secretary of the S.P.C.K., three members of the Eclectic (namely Newton, Cecil and Foster), Simeon, Wilberforce, and about six others. The Archbishop did not reply but Bishop Watson was enthusiastic, seeing in Christianity a rational religion which the Indians might do well to exchange for an irrational paganism, and seeing in a Christian India a bulwark against Russian imperialism.

Watson's support was valuable, but it was on Wilberforce and Simeon that the authors' hopes were pinned; Wilberforce to commend the scheme to the politicians, and Simeon to commend it to the Evangelical clergy; further, it was to Simeon that they looked for recruits and he became their agent. This marks the beginning of his long connection with the Church in India of which he was so justly proud. In 1830 he wrote on the front of Brown's covering letter: "Almost all the good men who have gone thither have been recommended by me." (These included David Brown, Claudius Buchanan, Henry Martyn, Thomas Thomason and Daniel Corrie.) "I used jocosely to call India my *Diocese*. Since there has been a bishop I modestly call it my Province!" In 1789 Brown wrote to Simeon somewhat impatient of the delay, saying that, if a Government-sponsored scheme came to nothing, something should be attempted on "a private footing".[1] Though Brown was possibly thinking of the S.P.C.K. doing a little more, it was from ideas like these that C.M.S. came into being.

In July 1790 Grant returned to this country partly with the object of canvassing for his mission scheme. He called on the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London, and even succeeded in persuading the former to seek an audience with George III on his behalf;[2] he made friends with Wilberforce and used the opportunities of the discussions he had on India

[1] *Memorials of D. Brown*, p. 250.

[2] C. Padwick in *Henry Martyn* (1922), p. 35, describes this interview, taking her material from Thackeray's *Four Georges*.

with Pitt and Dundas, the President of the Board of Control, to put forward his views on missions. He visited the offices of the S.P.C.K., then in Bartlett's Buildings, Holborn, and he travelled to Yorkshire to consult George Burnett and to see whether there were any possible missionaries among the pensioners of the Elland Society. Burnett was away unfortunately but he wrote hopefully. Through Simeon, Grant met Claudius Buchanan in Cambridge; five years later Buchanan was in India.

Meanwhile Wilberforce was making himself master of the facts that Grant placed before him concerning moral conditions in India. In May 1793, when Parliament was discussing the renewal of the East India Charter, Wilberforce made proposals for increasing the number of the Company's chaplains, and also for sending out "fit and proper persons" acting as schoolmasters, missionaries or otherwise. These were to be approved by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London. The East India Directors feared the consequences of proselytizing Hindus and the Lords threw out the Bill. This meant that all hope of State-sponsored missions to India had to be abandoned.[1] Whatever was to be done would have to be done on "a private footing", and with regard to India, Grant and Simeon had to be content with a working partnership that sent out chaplains instead of missionaries.[2] With regard to a wider strategy, their thoughts increasingly turned from India to Africa and from a state missionary society to a church missionary society.

These developments were assisted by discussions that were taking place in the Eclectic and other Evangelical societies. In an earlier chapter something was said of the nature and proceedings of these societies and the close family relationship that existed between them. The Eclectic Society, however, was rather different from the rest, mainly because it was a London Society.

[1] This was the Dutch method of missions.

It is usually reckoned that Simeon was responsible for five chaplains in India; Brown, Buchanan, Martyn, Corrie and Thomason. In 1813 the joint efforts of Wilberforce, Grant and Buchanan persuaded Parliament to reverse their decision with regard to missionaries, and the Church Establishment "in the British territories in the East Indies" was placed "under the superintendence of a Bishop and three Archdeacons". Stock, *History of the Church Missionary Society* (1899), Vol. 1, p. 103.

It was founded in 1783 by John Newton, three years after he had come from Olney to be Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, Lombard Street. The other founder members were Richard Cecil, minister of St. John's Chapel, Bedford Row;[1] Henry Foster, who was Romaine's curate at St. Andrew Wardrobe, and a layman, Eli Bates. In 1786 they were joined by Thomas Scott, who after succeeding Newton at Olney had become chaplain to the Lock Hospital. His contribution to the Society was as great as that of Newton or Cecil.

They first met at the Castle and Falcon, Aldersgate Street,[2] which lay opposite the Moravian meeting hall where the Wesleys were converted. The proprietor, Dupont by name, was a regular attender at Spa Fields Chapel and hence welcomed religious meetings on his premises, which probably accounts not only for Newton's choice but also for the fact that the London Missionary Society and the Church Missionary Society also chose to be founded here. When the Eclectic Society was six weeks old Newton wrote to William Bull, "Our new institution at the Castle and Falcon promises well. We are now six members and voted a seventh last night. We begin with tea; then a short prayer introduces a conversation for about three hours upon a proposed subject, and we seldom flag." He concluded by saying that he thought they deserved the title of the Royal Society rather than that which met at Somerset House, "as with us, I trust, the members are all of the royal family and the King himself condescends to meet with us".[3] To a new member he wrote: "Next meeting Monday 14 August. The hour four. No admission after six. Penalty for absence (except the plea is approved by the Society) two shillings and sixpence. The Society has no name and espouses no party."[4] It soon, however, adopted the name of "The Eclectic" chosen probably from a sentence in Isaac Watts.[5]

[1] This was a proprietary chapel in the parish of St. Andrew's, Holborn.

[2] The "Castle and Falcon" was demolished in 1905–6 to make way for offices and buildings mainly connected with the General Post Office. The site was not actually built upon till 1924 when it was taken by the City of London Electric Company. The old cellars still remain and with them the smell of beer and spirits.

[3] Josiah Bull, *John Newton* (1868), p. 262.

[4] Bernard Martin, *John Newton, A Biography* (1950), p. 322.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 322.