

AN EARLY ECCLESIOLOGICAL TOUR

In 1843 John Mason Neale, one of the founders of the Cambridge Camden Society, composed a short book on a subject that was beginning to attract good numbers of well-educated young men whose imagination was stirred by the drama of the Oxford Movement and the consequent attention directed to the condition of the nation's churches. The Camden Society had been established in 1839 to promote Ecclesiology - 'the study of Gothic Architecture, and of Ecclesiastical Antiquities', - and it rapidly became the main channel for the investigation of Gothic design in all its phases and for the consideration of the appropriate furnishings of an Anglican church in the mid-nineteenth century.ⁱ Neale was in his final year at Trinity College in 1839; by 1843 he was Chairman of the Society and already the author of numerous pamphlets on ecclesiological matters, often in conjunction with his close friend at Trinity, Benjamin Webb. The Society encouraged its members to undertake church tours, in a restricted locality, to record the contents and condition of churches in a systematic way, in order to create a register of the medieval buildings of the Church of England.ⁱⁱ During his undergraduate years, Neale made several intensive tours of different localities, which set the pattern for the perambulations that he described in his book of 1843.ⁱⁱⁱ He gave this book an enigmatic title: *Hierologus: A Church Tour though England and Wales*.

Hierologus can be translated as 'A Discourse on Sacred Matters'. The format of the book is modelled on Izaak Walton's *Compleat Angler*, where the interlocutors are Piscator, Venator and Auceps, the angler, the hunter and the hawk. In Neale's book the speakers are Catholicus and Palaeophilus. The name Catholicus suggests one who approves of the congruity of the Roman and the Anglican churches, focussing on how much they hold in common in belief, doctrine and modes of worship. Such a person believes that the English Church reformed from the Roman Church, not against it. Palaeophilus indicates one who loves and reveres ancient things and traditions. Catholicus is probably the persona of John Mason Neale, while Palaeophilus may well refer to his friend Francis Paley, also a founder member of the Cambridge Camden Society and the author of a beautifully illustrated volume on Baptismal Fonts. I am inclined, however, to think that both speakers are facets of Neale himself, for it is difficult to distinguish one from the other.

We first meet our ecclesiological tourists outside the village of Croyland in Lincolnshire, as they prepare to visit the ruined abbey there. Their preliminary discussions reveal to the reader that this excursion is not primarily concerned with the recording of piscinae and sedilia and Decorated capitals; it has a far wider agenda, relating to the 'most unprecedented Church movement [that] is pervading every corner of our country'.^{iv} How can the Church in England, both in its material and its institutional form, command greater respect and reverence? How can a heightened sense of spirituality be fostered among the English people, who nominally consider themselves Christian? How can 'the present great revival of Christian principles' be helped forward by the design and atmosphere of churches? Why should Gothic be the style most suited to the expression of English devotion? As they look around them, the visitors are dismayed by the dilapidation of the churches and the irreverence, often amounting almost to sacrilege, that they encounter on all sides. Churches and abbey ruins have become places of thoughtless entertainment. Catholicus tells of his distress at finding a pleasure party having a picnic 'in the choir at Byland Abbey, the altar-stone serving for their table, and the grey old walls ringing again with their reckless merriment. Loud laughter in a desecrated priory always sounds to me like the mirth of a maniac'. In Ripon Cathedral the verger shows visitors the crypt and tells them, 'This was the place, gentlemen, where the monks used, in old times, to drag down hereticks, and murder them'. In St Alban's Abbey Catholicus is horrified to see the nave used as a playground: 'the immense length of the nave affords another kind of game. A visitor is blinded at the west end, and requested to find his way to the choir-door, which is, of course, nearly impossible; and you may sometimes see three or four persons at once playing at this profane species of blind-man's buff, staggering about the nave and aisles, and affording the highest amusement to the spectators'.^v

Similar incidents of contemporary profanity abound in *Hierologus*, and we have not advanced far into the text before the name of Sir Henry Spelman is invoked and his book *The History and Fate of Sacrilege* recommended to the reader. Spelman was a lawyer and ecclesiastical antiquary who flourished in the early seventeenth century. He was much grieved by the looting of the monasteries and the confiscation of church lands at the Reformation, and at the stripping away of church property in Elizabethan times. He had

come to regard sacrilege as the besetting sin of the nation, and believed that the wanton misappropriation and theft of property that belonged to the Church and therefore ultimately to God was a blight on the country and also on the families who were the guilty beneficiaries of these crimes. Vandalism and desecration of churches and holy places also offended God and would bring retribution. By tracing the history of families who had become the owners of church lands or buildings, Spelman found clear evidence of subsequent misfortune, of personal disasters, of destitution and above all of failure of the family line of descent. His book, written in the 1630s, was a warning to all who violated or misappropriated or profaned churches and church property, and these beliefs became part of the reinforcement of the Church of England at a time when public regard for the established Church was in decline. Neale and his associates in the Cambridge Camden Society, as well as all those who were inspired by the success of the Oxford Movement, felt that a new impulse to assert the sanctity of the ecclesiastical domain was needed in their own time, when materialism and secularism were advancing so powerfully. The reprinting of *The History and Fate of Sacrilege* would be a reminder of the perils of damaging the Church and its estate, and indeed, in 1846 Neale and his friend Benjamin Webb brought out a new edition of Spelman's work.

Neale would have liked to go even further. To atone for the dissolution and desecration of the monasteries, he would like to see some of them restored to active life. 'Imagine, for example, the impulse which would be given to the Church principle in a place like Leeds, if Kirkstall . . . were suddenly restored! The continual services, the active exertions of the religious in the haunts of misery and vice, the alms-giving, the attendance on diseases, as well spiritual as corporeal, - to what happy effects might they not lead!' Palaeophilus immediately agrees: 'the manufacturing districts would be the first to profit from so glorious a revival. Cells would be planted from the larger houses in the immediate neighbourhood of such towns as Birmingham, Liverpool, Rochdale, Manchester and Bradford . . .' And there would be a wonderful increase in the number of young priests required for this new mission. 'There can be no doubt that the monastic system will, sooner or later, - but I think very soon - find its way into the English Church'.^{vi} As the tourists walk towards the ruined abbey at Croyland, Palaeophilus remarks 'as a work of religion, how glorious would be the re-edification of the whole pile!' This willingness to welcome the revival of the monasteries in England throws an instructive light on what Neale meant when he proclaimed that he had a liberal 'Catholic' outlook in religious matters. The two young ecclesiologists walk into the abbey with their sketchbooks and notebooks, their foot-rules and measuring tapes, to make a record of the contents,^{vii} but their imagination soars far beyond documentation to a vision of England as a Holy Land restored.

The visitors from Cambridge know they are part of a mission to re-Christianize England. Their study of the furnishings of parish churches and cathedrals causes them to imagine how these places looked in medieval times, when they were the devotional centres of a unified Christian nation. The text of *Hierologus* contains many passages that evoke the processions and ceremonies of worship that once involved the whole of society. The inspection of a brass memorial to a medieval priest stirs a desire for the revival of those fair vestments 'which our clergy ought to wear; ay, and which, before very long, they will wear. I am sure that when once churches are built or restored so as to be equal to those of olden times . . . when we have gilded and frescoed roofs and wall, rood-screens burning with gold, rich, deeply-tinted windows, and encaustic tiles, the poverty of our present vestments will become intolerable'.^{viii} (Neale had recently taken orders and did not relish the thought of a lifetime clad in the clerical drabness of the Georgian Church.) Catholicus mentions that ancient splendour is making a come-back in some corners of England, but regrettably not in the national Church. He alludes to 'S. Chad's at Birmingham, and S. Barnabas at Nottingham, and several others of those which Mr. Pugin has erected' for the recently emancipated Roman Catholic Church. Neale shared Pugin's dreams for 'The Revival of Christian Architecture in England', the title of the book Pugin published in 1843, the same year as *Hierologus* appeared; Neale must have appreciated its famous frontispiece that showed the sun rising over a city crowded with the spires and towers of newly built Gothic churches. (Pugin's book also contains a plate of his own design for memorial brasses showing new styles of clerical vestments for priests.) It is this sense of shared sympathy with Pugin's aspirations that helps to explain the choice of the pseudonym Catholicus in Neale's own work.

Another indication of Neale's incipient Anglo-Catholic credentials is his desire to see the Church of England canonize its own saints. He is reflecting on some of the great supporters of the Church in times of need -

those who 'might preserve her unfettered by the secular arm' - and pauses on the name of William Laud: 'When will our Church canonize him as S. William of Canterbury?' Neale certainly admired Laud as the restorer of St Paul's Cathedral and the promoter of 'the beauty of holiness' ideal in the time of Charles I, and as someone who advanced the interests of the clergy as a class. He also viewed him as a martyr who died to defend the rights of the Church of England. But Neale showed his rather limited understanding of what the great British public would put up with in the way of religious innovation when he urged Laud's canonization. Many Englishmen who knew their seventeenth-century history regarded Laud as a tyrant of the Church who used his authority as Archbishop to enforce practices that were deeply offensive to mainstream Protestants. His harsh regime alienated many more from the established Church than it won over, and when he was arrested and tried for treason, on the charge that he was attempting to restore popery, very little sympathy was shown towards him. Laud had been immensely divisive in his own time, and the Anglo-Catholic movement that was beginning in the 1840s would also prove highly contentious as the Victorian age unfolded. Other more acceptable candidates favoured by Neale for Anglican sainthood in *Hierologus* were Lancelot Andrewes and Jeremy Taylor, men of widely acknowledged piety.

Saints and martyrs figure prominently in Neale's imagination. He loves to tell over their names, like beads upon a rosary, especially the Saxon ones who remind him of the long history of faith in these islands. In one of the numerous poetic sequences that he includes in the book (in imitation of Izaak Walton's practice in *The Compleat Angler*, one may assume), he conjures up a romantic vision of the Age of Faith before the Reformation, with processions of 'Chaunting Priests' following a Cross-bearer to the church, accompanying a poor man's funeral: 'And o'er the poor man's pall they bade the sacred banner wave / To teach her sons that Holy Church hath victory o'er the grave.' 'Gentle nuns' and friars attend and give comfort, and the light of hope and charity shines on the land, until the impious tyrant Henry destroys the whole harmonious scene.

He cast away, as a thing defiled, the remembrance of the just;
And the relics of our martyrs he scattered to the dust;
Yet two at least, in their holy shrines, escaped the spoiler's hand,
And S. Cuthbert and S. Edward might alone redeem a land!

The holiness of the Saxon saints still sustains the nation, and from them runs a spiritual strength that survived the Reformation. Though now much diminished by the worldliness of the Georgian era, that catholic and apostolic power, so strong in ancient days, is still present in the Church of England, for 'England's Church is Catholick, though England's self be not! / England of Saints!' Neale's Society at Cambridge aspired to be an influential part of the revival of Christian worship based on acceptable pre-Reformation principles:

Thy Church, awaking from her sleep, [will] come glorious forth at length,
And in sight of angels and of men display Her hidden strength:
Again shall long processions sweep though Lincoln's minster pile;
Again shall banner, cross and cope gleam thro' the incensed aisle;
...
And tierce, and nones, and matins, shall have each their holy lay;
And the Angelus at Compline shall sweetly close the day.
England of saints!^x

This imagined England is essentially a pastoral land, a land of villages and small towns for the most part. Neale develops in *Hierologus* what might be called an ecclesiological aesthetic. Time and again he calls attention to the visual pleasures of church visiting, remarking on the attractiveness of the approach to a town, the clustering of cottages and trees by the church, the pleasing composition of buildings around a tower or spire: we are in the world of nineteenth-century water-colours. The inspection of the church and its contents is part of a wider experience, essentially the experience of a 'sweet especial rural scene' with the promise of an architectural revelation at its core. Every now and then there is a brief awareness of some grim industrial conurbation far away, devoid of spiritual illumination, some town that has grown too

large and too fast to be leavened by churches, a semi-pagan growth that has to be christianized - but not yet.

The way the modern world impinges on Catholicus and Palaeophilus, who usually walk from village to village, is the railway. As they walk away from Northampton, they come across a new railway, which Palaeophilus calls 'our future friend'. Catholicus, in contrast, is dismayed. 'How lamentably unromantic is every thing and every one becoming! We must throw in our lot with others, and submit to be whirled on with the rest of the world'. However, he admits that the arrival of the train is 'a lively sight', and he is astonished 'to see the coolness with which the engine-drivers loll over the rails of their little domain, and the ease with which the huge thing rolls up and stops - in with you! - at the will of its masters.' Palaeophilus is concerned at 'the immense moral mischief that railroads have caused and will cause to England, making it into one huge manufacturing town - amalgamating into one senseless heap the various usages of different localities'. Railway travel is a mixed blessing. Though 'a huge viaduct crossing a lovely valley is a blot or blur on the landscape . . . the traveller upon the railway has many new and beautiful scenes opened to him . . . in point of picturesqueness. . . the panorama of the most different objects, crowded on one after another, like a feverish dream, is the romance - if there be any - of railroad travelling'.^x

Whether they approve of it or not, the railway takes them to York where both visitors admire the Minster as one of the supreme achievements of the Middle Ages. Its nobility, however, is diminished by the unworthiness of the people who saunter around in it. They see not, neither do they pray. 'What a miserable thing is an afternoon service in York Minster! I wonder that such continual coming in and going out of the choir, in the very middle of service, such irreverence, such lolling, or rather lying down, on the forms, are not felt to be a disgrace. To make the thing perfect, half-a-dozen sofas should be put in the middle of the choir and placarded, *For the accommodation of visitors*; and then the profanity would hardly exceed the present'.^{xi} The indifference of the clergy to divine service is indicative of a broader lack of interest. The visitors note what a large chapter the Minster has, but only two members of the clergy are present at the service they attend. They recognise that as ecclesiologists, they have an unusually keen sensitivity to the contemporary neglect of the Church and its mission, so they console themselves with the knowledge that sensitive souls suffer more than ordinary mortals.

It is to have a deeper sense than most
Of what should be; and deeper pain than most
To see what is.^{xii}

In York their spirits are raised by the splendour of the medieval glass in the Minster and the parish churches. It is a measure of the seriousness of their inspection that they are prepared to spend many hours copying the windows into their record books. Catholicus presciently remarks, 'I wish some one could be stirred up to catalogue the glass we have yet remaining, after the eras of the Reformation, and of the Rebellion . . .'^{xiii} It would be another hundred and fifty years before the establishment of the *Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi* would realise this project of recording all the medieval stained glass in Great Britain. Neale himself would have confidently embarked on this agreeable task, had he not already so much Camden Society business in hand. The broad and detailed knowledge of medieval glass in churches all across the country from Cornwall to Carlisle that he reveals in scattered comments in his text is quite remarkable for a young man at a time when travel around the regions was still strenuous and slow.

Several times in *Hierologus* Neale refers to the ecclesiologists' custom of walking from church to church in a spirit of cheerful reverence as a form of pilgrimage, and pilgrimage is a tradition he would like to revive as an aspect of Catholicity. He is drawn to the idea of visiting places where early English saints were active or are buried, and he deplores the destruction of shrines at the Reformation, imagining them restored as places where men and women of singular piety could be honoured and remembered. Neale is aware of a large corpus of hymns by early Christian poets - most of them, of course, in Latin - which preserve something of the spirit of the early Church and could be translated into English and used in modern services. Throughout his career Neale would produce such translations, many of which are printed in *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. Surprisingly, he does not seem to be familiar with medieval devotional

literature in English, but he has an unexpected acquaintance with seventeenth-century religious poetry. He urges his readers to look into works by Giles and Phineas Fletcher, Francis Quarles and George Wither, and is particularly enthusiastic about Joseph Beaumont, whose *Psyche* is a thesaurus of devotional modes of the Laudian Church. 'In speaking of the Holy Eucharist, Beaumont carries one back to the writers of an earlier age by his fervour'.^{xiv} Greatest praise is given to Thomas Heywood's *Hierarchie of the Blessed Angells* from the 1630s, 'a general system of divinity . . . a work of immense learning and full of sound piety',^{xv} a heady mixture of theology and imaginative speculation about the angelic world which would be a tonic to the spiritual constitution of Anglicanism. Neale wished to diversify and enlarge the range of devotional experience available to worshippers in the Church of England, with stimulating contributions from different ages and cultures that could be woven into the developing pattern of catholicity. One reason why ecclesiologists needed to have a strong historical and even antiquarian background was that they should be able to 'enter into the feeling which animated the designs of our ancestors, and the absence of which makes the most correctly wrought details of modern times too often little more than a dead letter'.^{xvi} Worship and architectural restoration should both be informed by the conviction of a traditional faith in order to be effective.

Aspects of church practice that did not have the sanction of ancient tradition or did not contribute to a congregation's sense of community should be jettisoned. Chief among these inherited mistakes, in Neale's view, was the filling of the nave with box pews that had started in the early seventeenth century and had continued into late Georgian times. These private receptacles had produced social divisions by emphasising the hierarchy of the local community in church, where a spiritual equality should prevail; they entailed pew-rents which were also divisive, their high sides could provide support and shelter for those who did not wish to engage in the service, and in many cases the lay-out of the pews meant that many worshippers sat with their back to the minister and the altar. The poor were often relegated to the side-lines, to the narrow benches that were the free seats. In Neale's view, the seating arrangements commonly in use in parish churches had already driven large numbers of the poorer members of a congregation into the chapels of the Wesleyans, where a more egalitarian method prevailed. Box pews should be replaced with open benches, and the practice of charging pew-rents should be dropped.^{xvii} Neale also found galleries in church unacceptable. They had been introduced in the previous century, and not only did they have the effect of dividing the congregation and overcrowding the church, but they also had unwelcome associations with public theatres. In addition, there was an aesthetic objection, for the galleries broke up the harmonious lines of the Gothic arches that contributed so much to the atmosphere of a church.

The loose rambling format of *Hierologus* allows Neale freedom to express his preferences and prejudices on all manner of ecclesiastical matters, for the book is essentially a long-running conversation between two like-minded young enthusiasts who have every intention of airing their opinions and spiralling off into digressions as they tramp from church to church through the long days of summer. Dismay at the current neglected state of the Church and the casual, irreverent attitudes of the older generation alternates with hope that a more responsive religious sensibility is developing in the nation. There is confidence that 'the spirit of church restoration has begun in earnest'.^{xviii} Palaeophilus brings the narrative to an end with a rhapsodic account of the joys of ecclesiology, and he speaks of 'the elation of spirits with which in the fresh morning coolness we have set forth to a long blue day and to a fine and unexplored tract of churches, - how can I but love the study? how can I but feel the most devoted affection to so noble a cause as that of Church restoration?'^{xix} John Mason Neale was able to maintain this elation throughout the rest of his highly productive life, and he lived to see the ecclesiastical scene changed largely in accordance with his desires.

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 August 2020

i The circumstances of the foundation of the Society are described in detail by James F. White in *The Cambridge Movement: the Ecclesiologists and the Gothic Revival*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1962.

ii As an aid to those who were embarking on the practice of ecclesiology, in 1839 the new society published a guide to

the various styles of architecture found in English churches, and gave a detailed analysis of the different stages of Gothic. The guide also contained analytical descriptions of the common components and furnishings of a medieval church. This tract, with the title 'A Few Hints on the Practical Study of Ecclesiastical Antiquities', was reprinted a number of times in the early years of the Society. The text is reprinted in '*temples . . . worthy of His presence*': the early publications of the Cambridge Camden Society, ed. Christopher Webster, Spire Books, Reading, 2003, pp. 63-126.

- iii For details of these early tours, see *The Letters of John Mason Neale D.D.*, ed. Mary Rawson, London, 1910, p.14.
- iv *Hierologus: A Church Tour through England and Wales*, 1843, p. 7
- v *Hierologus*: These examples are taken from pages 8-11.
- vi *Hierologus*, pp. 27-8.
- vii Members of the Cambridge Camden Society were encouraged to visit parish churches and compile what was called a Church Scheme that would involve measurements of the interior, notes on the architectural styles employed and details of the furnishings and memorials. The general condition of the church was also assessed.
- viii *Hierologus*, p.72.
- ix *Hierologus*, pp. 101-2.
- x *Hierologus*, pp. 92-3.
- xi *Hierologus*, pp. 121-2.
- xii *Hierologus*, p. 116.
- xiii *Hierologus*, p. 111.
- xiv *Hierologus*, pp. 201-8.
- xv *Hierologus*, p. 202
- xvi *Hierologus*, pp. 189-90.
- xvii Neale was most probably the author of the tract entitled *The History of Pews* that was published by the Cambridge Camden Society in 1841. It advocated their abolition, arguing that they were a late, post-Reformation innovation.
- xviii *Hierologus*, p. 286.
- xix *Hierologus*, p.303.