

The Shirburnian, June 1907, pp.85-87.

Book review: Eleanor A. Towle, *John Mason Neale, D.D., A Memoir* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1906):

The subject of this memoir was at Sherborne for only two years from 1833 to 1835. He came at the age of 15, left prematurely and, if we are to trust his biographer in no way distinguished himself while at School. Yet there is no doubt that during those two years Sherborne harboured within her walls, and, it may fairly be claimed, influenced by her beauty and her history, a very remarkable man. The son of a Senior Wrangler who died a few years after the boy's birth, he was brought up by a strict Evangelical mother with all the rigour of the current educational system. Thus we find him, in his ninth year, writing summaries of long-winded sermons, learning by heart Greek texts, boasting of a mastery of eleven conjugations in French, and always longing, to use the evergreen misquotation of his biographer, for fresh fields and pastures new. His life at Sherborne is dismissed very briefly. The two most attractive features in his eyes seem to have been the great tenor bell in the Abbey, and his belief that Osborne was the original of Goldsmith's 'Deserted Village.'

He went to a tutor near Cambridge for a year before matriculating, and it was during this time that he was carried away on the flood-tide of the Oxford Movement. He won a Scholarship at Trinity in 1836, but never obtained an honour degree. In those days one had to pass in the Mathematical as well as in the Classical Tripos, and, in spite of his ancestry, Neale failed (and other eminent Shirburnians have since followed his example) to attain to any sort of distinction in a branch of learning which had no attractions for him. He was however generally recognised as the best classic of his year, and was elected Fellow and Tutor of Downing College. While still an undergraduate he founded, in conjunction with his life-long friend, Benjamin Webb, the Cambridge Camden (afterwards the Ecclesiological) Society. Its object was to reform Church architecture and revive the spirit of Church restoration. It thus aimed at helping the Oxford Movement on a side which was somewhat neglected by the leaders of the latter. This society, avowedly High Church in its aims, although at first extremely popular, began gradually to be suspected of Romanising tendencies, and its leaders became marked men. Neale soon gave up his work at Downing; he was ordained in 1841 and was for a short time curate at Guildford. Appointed vicar of Crawley in 1842 he was almost immediately obliged to resign through ill health and spent three winters in succession in Madeira. His inability to take parochial work set him free for the more congenial labours of translating and editing, and he was already winning a high reputation as an authority on ancient Canon Law and on early Church History and also as a translator of hymns.

On finally returning to England in 1846 he was presented to the Wardenship of Sackville College, a 'foundation for the shelter and maintenance of thirty poor and aged householders' at East Grinstead in Sussex. Here Neale lived until his death in 1866. He showed great energy in reforming the College, but unfortunately succeeded in quarrelling with many of his neighbours and also with his Diocesan. But these differences may well be forgotten. Neale will always be remembered as the scholar and hymnologist, and not as the Warden of Sackville College. The six pages filled with the titles of his works give some idea of the learning and the energy of the man, his most important work being perhaps his 'History of the Eastern Church.' Our own hymn book contains two of his original hymns and more than a dozen of his translations, including 'Now that the daylight fills the sky' and 'Jerusalem the golden.' Of Neale as a husband and father there is unfortunately little mention. But apart from this the work is well done, and we are grateful to the authoress for a clear and interesting account of a very notable Old Shirburnian. It may be noticed in conclusion that the account of Neale's Sherborne career given in this book does not agree with the entry in the *Register*. In the latter it is stated that he left a year earlier, in 1834; while he is credited with prizes for 'Latin and English Essay,' of which the authoress of the 'Memoir' would deprive him.