

Eminent English Churchmen

THOMAS BRAY

(1656-1730)

By Arthur Middleton

The vision

The Bray Library was always part of the agenda of Chapter Meetings when I was first ordained and it familiarized me with the name and work of this eminent churchman. These libraries, which SPCK enabled local clergy chapters to maintain, were part of Thomas Bray's vision to encourage a reading and informed clergy. 'If true and unselfish devotion to the Church of Christ, indefatigable and most successful labour in its behalf, and a long and blameless life spent, with scant recognition, in the interests of religion, constitute a title to be ranked amongst our post-reformation saints, no one deserves that title better than Thomas Bray; for no man did more for the Church at home and abroad, and no man received less from her in the way of earthly recompense ... it is astonishing how little he is now known. He is, perhaps, hardly more, than a name even to many really well-informed Churchmen.' (J. H. Overton, *Some Post-Reformation Saints*, p. 48)

Influences

Born at Marton in Shropshire, Bray went from Grammar School to Oxford and was ordained on graduation. After a short curacy he became domestic chaplain to Sir Thomas Price in Warwickshire, who gave Bray the living of Marston Lee, where his diligent and efficient ministry was noticed by John Kettlewell the vicar of Coleshill. Here Bray noted the poverty of the country parson preventing him purchasing relevant books to meet the demands of his work. Scholarly Kettlewell with Bishop Ken was concerned about the ignorance of the layman about his Church after the persecution under the Commonwealth. Kettlewell noticed Bray's own library contained material for an instructed Church—George Herbert, Jeremy Taylor, Hooker, Andrewes, Laud, volumes of the Fathers, that primitive piety the Church of England had claimed for her own. Nelson described Kettlewell as one 'who served at the altar without covetousness or ambition' and Bray was in the same mould. Bray's spiritual agony about the hopelessness, ignorance and poverty of the poor priest affected

Kettlewell in whom Bray found the scholarship and learning he admired, an understanding holiness, and the conception of the Church and Sacraments he was committed to and endeared him to so many people.

Probably, Kettlewell introduced Bray to Lord Digby, whom he impressed by an assize sermon he had preached as a young priest at Warwick. Digby always sought the best priests for preferment to the livings in his gift, but he died before offering anything to Bray. His brother gave him Over-Whitacre, and then Sheldon (1690). Here, Bray wrote his, *Catechetical Lectures*, intending to write four volumes, but only the first was published because of distractions. Catechizing by teaching and discussion was serious work with the grading of different groups and Bray compiling collections of prayers from the Bible, Psalms and Prayer Book, and requiring Confirmands to keep a quiet day before taking their vows.

His book sold well, attracted much attention, and impressed the Bishop of London, Dr. Compton, who was also diocesan of all the colonies. The colony of Maryland had endowed an established Church with numerous parishes like those in England and wished to have a priest to superintend all the parishes. They asked Compton to send out as his Commissary some experienced, unexceptionable priest, and he sent Bray, who agreed, on condition that funds were raised to supply the Maryland clergy with books. Bray had discovered that only “the poorest sort” of clergy, those unable to buy the necessary books, would go abroad. In 1696 delays over legalities gave Bray time to collect subscriptions for such books. The bishops supported him, but elsewhere objections were raised that too many poor clergy at home needed such help first. Bray acknowledged the objection and extended his scheme to establish parochial libraries in every deanery in England and Wales, to supply a reservoir of theological books, which were to be loaned to the clergy. His aim was to establish a reading and informed clergy and convenient centres where the clergy might meet for theological discussion, instead of meeting in pubs, or in vicarages. This would be the means of reviving the ancient office of Rural Dean, which had become practically obsolete.

America and SPCK

Despite two offers of preferment in England, the office of sub-almoner and the living of S. Botolph without Aldgate, Bray was determined to go to Maryland. A delay of two years enabled Bray to seed his life’s work, from the establishment of deanery libraries and a teaching clergy to the promotion of Christian knowledge generally; and in 1698 he became the

primum mobile of SPCK. He failed to obtain public aid and even a charter for the society; so, in a leap of faith he established with a few able coadjutors, a purely voluntary society, the first objects of which were to promote the education of the poor, chiefly through charity schools, to extend the library scheme by the dissemination generally of religious books, to convert the non-white races in the West Indies and America, and help missionary work generally. Having set the ball a-rolling, Bray in 1699 went to Maryland, to organize the Church there. He founded many libraries, held a general visitation, and drew up an exhaustive and interesting memorial of the state of the Church abroad for the benefit of English readers.

He failed to attract the better-off young clergy for America and sailed with two poor priests, but this increased his resolve to establish libraries for clergy and pious lay-folk. His first American library was set up with a contribution from Princess Anne, the heir to the throne, and fifty others followed for which he collected £1,500 giving £500 himself. Professor Klinberg of Los Angeles described Bray's zeal for Christian knowledge as one of the major forces in building up the spiritual and humanitarian side of American life. 'No body of men has ever more thoroughly analyzed the spiritual and intellectual needs of a new society than did Bray and his associates ... The library was in the judgment of Bray and his colleagues an indispensable factor in inducing men of education to go to the colonies.' His unstinting perseverance brought considerable success in supplying books at home and abroad.

Here Bray learned the needs, temptations and opportunities of the Church of England in America and worked to establish a standard of conduct, teaching, and missionary endeavour in the New World. Catechizing, Preaching, Teaching, faithfulness to the Sacraments and simple rules of prayer were to be the essentials of pastoral ministry in a world that was only too ready to criticize. They needed a Bishop but the Church at home was slow to understand. For Dr Klinberg, 'The genius of Thomas Bray and his successors lies in their complete understanding of the frontier problem of intellectual poverty in all its ramifications. With superb intelligence they took steps to remedy this colonial poverty of the mind and soul.' A conviction close to Bray's heart was the need to include in the Church's membership other races that would give it a rich and diverse complexion. To this end he founded the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and cared for these people all his life.

Returning home

The work of his society had extended making it necessary to separate the propagation of the Gospel in the Plantations into the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. Bray was the prime mover establishing the new society and obtaining the Charter from King William III in June 1701. His work was now at home with a wife and two children; so in 1706 he accepted the living of St Botolph without Aldgate, and became an active and efficient parish priest for nearly twenty-five years. His energy and meticulous time management meant that his parish work did not interfere with his work in the wider Church or *vice versa*. He was involved in many schemes for good, which flourished in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, being the chief supporter of the religious societies founded in 1678, an ardent supporter of the charity schools, and bringing relentless zeal in his work for SPCK and SPG.

Bray never forgot his primary concern with the ignorant poor priest in England and grasped how to use constructively the Church of England's shape, with the Rural Deanery, that came to life in Bray's mind. So much controversy in the history of the Church of England meant so little practical and constructive thinking. There were so many books of personal piety, but so little since Hooker for the shaping and building of the Church. Bray envisages and brings into being his libraries to be the property of the Rural Deanery as such priests meeting in their library to 'warm each other's hearts with an affection to things above.' Discussions might range from how to keep the library up-to-date and augment it with the best books: but also (a) How to furnish the laity with small practical and devotional tracts; (b) How to principle the children and youth with catechetical instruction and erect schools for the education of poor children; (c) How to get laws put into practice against Profaneness and Immorality; (d) Reading over their ordination vows together, and also the Rubrics, Articles and Canons of the Church, and the Articles of Inquiry at Episcopal and Archidiaconal Visitations.

These libraries, Parochial, Ruridecanal and Missionary, numbered sixty-one in England and fifty in America. Among the English authors whose books he spread abroad were Lancelot Andrewes, Pearson, Stillingfleet, Hooper, Jeremy Taylor, Kettlewell, Matthew Hales, Tillotson, Sherlock, Patrick, Hall, Laud, Cosin, St. Basil, St. Jerome, St. Augustine. St. Bernard, Thomas a Kempis, St. Francis de Sales, and Erasmus also come into his lists and he includes books on what he calls 'Natural Knowledge and Humanity. 'It was a great service to the cause of Christian knowledge, undertaken for no reward and, as he said, with 'unspeakable labour and fatigue'; and he added to it in these two years, the foundation of the first of those societies which make his concern for

Christian knowledge a live issue today. Perhaps he felt his solitary efforts almost unbearable, and he began to think of a body of men dedicated to his mission.

The associates of Dr. Bray

His original scheme for parochial libraries and the conversion of the non-white races seemed threatened when he became seriously ill in 1723. So he gathered to himself other kindred spirits, to continue the work after his death. These "Associates of Dr. Bray," included some of the most pious and prominent churchmen throughout the eighteenth century. They published an annual report of their work, always prefacing it with a short memoir of Dr. Bray, and acknowledged their founder whose memory was kept alive.

In his old age Bray started a scheme to improve the conditions of those in prison, being concerned to elevate the characters of such people; he joined in the scheme of General Oglethorpe for founding a colony for those who could not find work at home. The pains this aged man took in catechising the children and doing other work in his own parish surprised and delighted Ralph Thoresby, who speaks enthusiastically of it in his Diary. And finally, he never stopped writing works of piety, his last, written not long before his death, was a brief memoir of John Rawlet, of Newcastle, the trusted friend of Kettlewell from whom Bray had doubtless derived the first impression of him. Thomas Bray died in 1730, without having received any adequate recognition, save in the many good works with which his name is connected.