

Eminent English Churchmen By the Reverend Canon Arthur Middleton

Martin Joseph Routh 1755-1854

IN 1854 A remarkable man, a learned divine and the last man to wear a wig in Oxford, died in his hundredth year. Martin Joseph Routh, who retained his faculties to the end, was a patristic scholar, President of Magdalen College Oxford for sixty-three years, and was still buying books at ninety-seven. As an author he must be unique in having a gap of seventy years between his first publication and his latest in 1848. His father was Rector of South Elmham in Suffolk where Routh was born in 1755, the eldest of thirteen children, and he went up to Queen's Oxford in 1770. It was a coarse time everywhere in England, when standards in the Church were low and irreligion prevailed everywhere, but there were exceptions in Bishop Butler (1692-1752), and in those who cultivated classical scholarship and theology in Oxford in the worst of times. He graduated in 1774, was ordained deacon in 1777, but was not priested for thirty three years in 1810 on becoming Rector of Tylehurst near Reading, blaming this on his preoccupation with his major work the *Reliquae Sacrae*. After numerous college appointments and when he was almost forty-four, in July 1791, he was elected President of Magdalen College, Oxford, a post he would not relinquish until he was ninety-seven. As a bachelor his sister Sophia kept house for him until she married. Routh married Eliza Agnes Blagrove, thirty-five years his junior, on his sixty-fifth birthday (18-9-1869), having almost thirty-five years of happy marriage. Agnes survived him by fifteen years. He always wore the gown and cassock.

The American Church

The American Church had no episcopate and sent their ordinands to England for ordination. One fifth did not return, either dying of smallpox or being shipwrecked. Numerous attempts had been made to obtain the episcopate for America, but hostility and misconceptions about episcopacy among Dissenters, and the requirement of English bishops for oaths of allegiance inconsistent with the requirements of American citizenship, impeded any progress. The Danish Church offered to help. At a party with Bishop Thirlow, Routh, aged twenty seven in 1782, impressed upon Dr. Cooper, the President of a New York College and friend of Samuel Seabury, that the Danish succession was invalid. Friends of the American Church met with Dr. Routh, known to be a man of learning, and discussed the matter with him.

Goaded on by a proposal to implement a temporary Presbyterian scheme, two priests were nominated at a secret meeting to be sent to England for consecration, one of whom dropped out. Samuel Seabury came, was unsuccessful with the English bishops and was advised to consult with Routh about the Danish offer. Routh said “I ventured to tell them sir, that *they would not find there what they wanted.*” He went on to convince them that the Scandinavian sources –including Norwegian and Swedish as well as Danish, were untrustworthy. So Routh, diverted Seabury to the “unimpeachable claims of the Scottish episcopate”, Sixty nine years later an American divine visited Routh, who recounted this story, and was delighted to discover that he had lived to see thirty bishops and 1,500 clergy in the American Church.

Ecumenical

During the French Revolution a number of French priests had to escape to England without their belongings and it is possible that Routh influenced the Clarendon Press in 1795 to produce an edition of the Vulgate New Testament for their use. Two thousand copies were distributed.

William Palmer, who became a tutor of Magdalen in 1838, wanted to foster closer relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Church of England, so he drew up a petition to explain Anglicanism should he visit Russia and Routh refined it. Palmer also wrote in Latin an *Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles* for his pupils and for taking to Russia to explain his position to the Orthodox. Routh read it with approval and Newman claimed that ‘its spirit and drift is the same as that of No. 90 of the *Tracts for the Times*’. Palmer accepted the doctrines of *Eastern Orthodoxy* except for their understanding of the Holy Spirit. He thought it his duty to visit the Russian Orthodox Church and claim admission to Communion as a member of the Catholic Church. Routh approved, though doubted any outcome because of ‘separation,’ ‘but it will show there are some among us who wish it otherwise.’ Disappointed that the college would not send Palmer with a letter of recommendation, Routh sent it under his own name, expressing his wish that Palmer ‘might be admitted to Communion in Russia provided nothing was required of him inconsistent with the faith and doctrine of the Church of England.’

In Study and Prayer

Next to Holy Scripture, despite the discouragement of the theological climate, he realised that to be a ‘well-furnished divine’ it was essential to have a knowledge of the writings of the early Fathers. Alongside early Councils and ecclesiastical historians he read chronologically the chief of the Greek and Latin Fathers. His father feared his son’s patristic familiarity

would leave him behind, making it difficult to talk with his son about the Fathers. In 1814 the first two volumes of his major work *Reliquae Sacrae* were published. His aim was to edit the ‘precious remains’ of the writings of the 2nd and 3^d century Fathers up to Nicaea, to remind a forgetful Church of the faith of their Fathers. Two additional volumes appeared in 1815 and 1818. A revised version was published with an additional volume of the *Reliquae* in 1848 when he was ninety three. His *Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Opuscula praecipua quaedam* was another work on patristic divinity published in 1832. Hippolytus, Irenaeus, Tertullian, the Creeds and Canons of the first four General Councils witness to what was the faith and discipline of the Church Universal. He confined himself to high Catholic antiquity with a passionate concern to get at the teaching of the Church in her best and purest days, ‘before the inclination to corrupt the deposit’. His churchmanship exhibited the best of Caroline divinity and he recognised the doctrine of the Church of England as the nearest approximation to primitive Catholicity. It was his desire to die, ‘as he had lived, attached to the Catholic Faith taught in the Church of England, and averse from all Papal and sectarian innovations.’ Other works included an early book on Plato (1784), his editing of Burnet’s *History of our Own time*, (1823) and Burnet’s *History of the Reign of King James II* (1852) with additional notes. His advice to students was, *always verify your sources*.

He seemed to live in his library. A copy of Laud’s *Devotions* (1667 edition, that this author possesses), which he loved and used, always lay on his table where he also prayed. This is interesting because Laud’s devotional character was of a peculiarly ecclesiastical mould, formal and systematic, simple and penitential. ‘Seven hours a day do I praise Thee’, meaning that the seven hours of the Church were his hours of prayer, and as they gave constantly recurring short respites and pauses to a life of intense activity, so they would give to Routh that same respite to a life of intense study. There was a daily form of prayer, a form for every day and a prayer for each hour of the day. The prayers were in the Church’s liturgical language, often from *The Book of Common Prayer*, appropriated in collect, psalmody and scripture for personal prayer. Such a pattern of prayer from ancient liturgies appealed to Routh as it had to Laud. He gave the copy to Sophia in 1818.

The Link

Canon Ollard (Dictionary of English Church History) claimed that Routh ‘represents the permanence of the Catholic tradition of the English Church, linking the theology of the Non-jurors and the Caroline Divines with the Oxford Movement’. Thomas Mozley spoke of him as ‘the greatest name in patristic theology at Oxford-indeed a name in Europe.’ Dean Church said that he ‘stood alone among his brother Heads in his knowledge of what

English theology was.’ Church was describing the reaction of the authorities who, attacked and condemned Tractarian teaching in violence and ignorance. He said that Oxford ‘was the home of what was especially accounted Church theology; and the Tractarian teaching, in its foundation and main outlines, had little but what ought to have been perfectly familiar to any one who had taken the trouble to study the great Church of England writers. To one who like Dr. Routh of Magdalen, had gone below the surface, and was acquainted with the questions debated by those divines, there was nothing startling in what so alarmed his brethren, whether he agreed or not; and to him the indiscriminate charge of Popery meant nothing. But Dr. Routh stood alone among his brother Heads in his knowledge of what English theology was. To most of them it was an unexplored and misty region.’

Routh had a great personal regard for Newman and often they would meet for extended discussion of theological matters. He spoke of Newman as that ‘clever young gentleman of Oriel, Mr. Newman’, and later as ‘the great Newman’. What Newman thought of Routh may be seen in his dedication to him in 1837 of his volume of Lectures. To ‘MARTIN JOSEPH ROUTH, D.D., President of Magdalen College, who has been reserved to report to a Forgetful Generation what was the Theology of their Fathers, This Volume Is Inscribed.’ Routh’s evaluation of the Oxford Movement can be given in his own words.

He had not been able to read any of the tracts with the exception of No.90, so he was not prepared to comment on them. But his perusal of many of the writings of Dr. Pusey and Mr. Newman enabled him to express his ‘admiration of the ardent piety, holy views, and scrupulous adherence to the ancient summaries of Catholic belief displayed in them. I likewise state my persuasion that these, in conjunction with other estimable works, have contributed to correct many erroneous notions too long prevalent amongst us, and subverting the unity and authority of the National Church’.

What alarmed many minds in the teaching of the Tractarians was perfectly natural to Routh with his solid patristic learning and wide knowledge of English theology since the Reformation. Their appeal to antiquity he did not find disturbing. He alone of the Heads of Oxford Colleges, with the exception of Dr. Richards, the Rector of Exeter College, stood by them in the conflict, and he followed the course of the Movement with sympathy and understanding, counting among his friends some of its strongest supporters. Routh’s greatest sympathy with the Tractarians lay in those expressions of Christian doctrine which they held in common with the Elizabethan divines. While he held tenaciously to his opinions, there was no narrowness of outlook. He never rejected his friends who went over to Rome, but treated them with a generosity quite uncommon in ‘his time, and

especially to Newman who when he retired to Littlemore and found himself snubbed and bullied by everybody in authority'.

His Library

When he died his library contained 16,000 books, and he had boasted 200 that were not to be found in the Bodleian Library. Half the library is theological, divinity and ecclesiastical history, the other half secular, a large part being English history. A fifth of the theology relates to the Fathers and a fifth to dogmatic theology and the controversies of the 17th century. Thirty yards of shelves were filled with booksellers catalogues, annotated in his hand. When he was ninety-seven he offered his library to Queen's College on condition he was allowed to continue using it, but they refused, so he gave his library to Durham University where it remains on Palace Green.