

# “Come Over and Help Us.”

## The SPG



*When I first arrived in the Province (AD 1692) I found it (Westchester) the most rude and beatbenish country I every saw in my whole life.*

—CALEB HEATHCOTE

The beginnings of the SPG (we shall abbreviate it, as do some of the encyclopedias) are to be found in the nagging sense of responsibility felt by cognizant Church of England people who addressed themselves to the question: What is being done by the Church in North America? By 1700 it was obvious that the future of the American coast from Georgia to Nova Scotia lay with the English. Roman Catholics and Puritans had made conspicuous settlements in Maryland and the colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Haven. Quakers had managed to put down roots in Pennsylvania and Rhode Island, in similar efforts to evade restrictions at home. The Church of England, however, would not be expected to make such particular colonizing efforts: as the national Church it might claim *all* the American seaboard as its proper field. Whenever churchmen in England summoned imagination sufficient to consider the problems and opportunities of America, this claim, sometimes expressed by zealous churchmen, created a fear that helped put iron into the souls of the patriots of 1776.

The iniquities of Restoration clergy in England have often enough been cataloged. It may shed some new light, however, to remember that despite the jubilant return of the Church of England to its former dominance, and the restrictive laws enacted by Parliament to safeguard those rights, the hierarchy in England must often have been preoccupied by the presence of Roman Catholicism in the court during the 1660s. The Queen, many ministers and mistresses, were avowed Roman Catholics. King James II declared himself converted to the Church of

Rome and sought to promote the fortunes of his Church. Though King Charles II was buried according to the rite of the English Church, his deathbed conversion to Rome was no secret.

In the light of Roman Catholic presence at court, the lingering Puritan pressures in many urban centers in England, and the restrictive measures adopted by Parliament to ensure the privileges of the Church of England, it is understandable that the pastoral oversight of a coastline three thousand miles away would not be uppermost in the minds of those who were, from time to time, reminded that they were responsible for America. The English hierarchy has been criticized unfairly for an apparent lassitude. The fact is that all was not as well at home as some historians have claimed. When, in 1675, Henry Compton, Bishop of London (1675–1713), made inquiry about America, the reply given him (and which we may believe he suspected would be given) was that an order from the reign of King Charles I provided that “the Bishop of London for the time being [have] the care and pastoral charge of sending over Ministers into our British Foreign Plantations and having jurisdiction over them.”<sup>1</sup> Compton thereafter *assumed* jurisdiction, but his authority to do so was clouded by the fact that Charles II had commissioned Gilbert Sheldon, Archbishop of Canterbury, to oversee the Church in Virginia and elsewhere. The history and records of which English prelate had authority—and how much authority—in America are confusing. By 1686 the Bishop of London appears to have had jurisdiction in New York, but his powers were limited because he could not give approval to benefices and he could not issue marriage licenses or probate wills. It was Richard Terrick, Bishop of London, at the outbreak of the Revolution who put the matter of American jurisdiction precisely. Though Terrick had made no extensive claim to power, he did state that America was one of “the more distant parts, which by long usage have been considered as having a more particular relationship to the Bishop of London, than to any other Bishop.”<sup>2</sup>

Even so, episcopal authority in New York, as elsewhere in the colonies, was effectively limited to withdrawing ministers from America or sending them here.

It was one thing for an independent Puritan or Separatist minister to cross the ocean with a shipload of emigrants. It was quite another to send a minister of the Church of England to a land where there was none of the ecclesiastical framework and supervision required in a church of episcopal orders. Bishop Compton needed some kind of system, some regulatory body, and it would have to be tailor-made for the work at hand. There must be authorities on both sides of the ocean: sending missionaries to America without due oversight would risk

scandal. (Compton's fears were well founded, as is proved by the records in Lambeth Palace Library; but it is pleasant to record that there are comparatively few negative reports about New York clergy there; for some reason, Virginia seemed to attract the troublesome ones.)

In an earlier day, the New England Company had fostered a ministry. An organization composed of churchmen and Dissenters had existed, having been chartered by Charles II in 1662. The religious societies already mentioned appear to have been fairly common in Restoration London, perhaps encouraged by a fear of popery on the one hand, and the obvious decline of morals on the other. We are told, further, that the societies sprang up to counteract "the infamous clubs of atheists, Deists, Socinians." Like the phenomena which soon would be discerned in eighteenth-century Wesleyan practices, and still later when the Parliamentary upheavals of 1832 seemed to threaten the Church's prerogatives, these Restoration societies used the Church's existing customs to confront sluggards within and unbelievers without. Daily prayers, for instance, were urged in the parish churches. Due preparation for the sacrament was stressed. The Eucharist every Sunday and holy day was promoted. In brief, these were groups dissatisfied with the Latitude men.

Active in such a movement was Thomas Bray (1656-1730). He was educated at Oxford's All Souls College, and after several curacies became rector of Sheldon in Warwickshire in 1690, a position he held till near the day of his death forty years later. Bray seems to have been an enthusiastic participant in the improving societies and when an appeal came from Maryland for help in the Church there in 1696, Compton asked Bray to go as his commissary.

Commissary? The word is new in the hierarchical appointments of the English Church. When the governor and assembly in Maryland framed their appeal to Compton, they asked for "a superintendent, commissary, or suffragan."<sup>3</sup> Was the function of a commissary ever defined officially? And did the various men who carried the title in the several colonies follow the guidelines laid upon them? Probably, the frontier situation required a flexibility the Restoration Church was strangely able to supply. The title was perhaps invented by Compton, whose own Diocese of London was at one time in his episcopate administered by "commissories." The commissary appears to have been the bishop's representative. His duties were to report to, and reprove in the name of, the Bishop of London. As it developed, the commissary probably had about as much authority as he wanted to have and his colleagues cared to extend to him.

Due to distressing delays and the general affable inactivity that

characterized the English Church's administration of its colonial responsibilities, Bray did not sail for North America for three years. (Many years later, in 1946, Archbishop Fisher graciously apologized to a General Convention for the "extremely ineffective way" his predecessors had exercised their responsibilities in the colonies.) Bray, however, was not idle during those three years. He recognized two primary needs for the Church in America: missionaries and libraries. So, during his wait, he founded, in 1698, the Society for Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SPCK: a familiar acronym). Compton gave his blessing to the society, as he would similarly approve the missionary society Bray was conceiving.

Bray remained in Maryland only a few months. Very wisely, he saw that his role should be neither missionary nor troubleshooter in America; rather, his gifts lay in organizing and promoting the work he had at heart. Thus he returned quickly to the only place where the organizing and promoting could effectively be done: England.

The first meeting of the chartered Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts was held on June 27, 1701. There were four bishops, six laymen, nineteen other clergy present; the Archbishop of Canterbury presided. A splendid beginning. Successive meetings usually at St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, London, were equally well attended, says a contemporary report, "the episcopate being largely represented notwithstanding that the hour was frequently as early as eight or nine in the morning"<sup>4</sup>—an interesting comment inasmuch as King Charles II was known to have been up and ready for the day's activities soon after five in the morning.

At these Society meetings, in the years that followed, the members would inquire "into the religious state of the colonies, and information was sought and obtained from trustworthy persons at home and abroad." And funds were raised, again and again. In the Lambeth archives may be seen the reports sent across the ocean. They were read, discussed, resolved when possible. We can be glad that the eighteenth was a broad-minded century. And some of the bishops present may be forgiven if they rejoiced (silently) that the parson about whom they were now hearing was out of their diocese. They are not always dull reports; sin always travels with sanctity, and sometimes overtakes it. But there were the saints, too—and many of them—who faced the uncertainties of North America. New York had more than its share of them.

The SPG maintained clergy, and sometimes schoolmasters. School-teaching and the ordained ministry were then very closely associated. Many of the colonial churches had a schoolhouse nearby. Education was a Christian responsibility and taken very seriously.

THE MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE BEGINS

In 1701 the Province of New York had perhaps 25,000 people in twenty-five towns or hamlets. Ten of the settlements—one thinks of Esopus (Kingston), for instance—were thoroughly and doggedly Dutch. The only Episcopal church was the new Trinity "at New York town," although we know congregations were increasingly forming to worship according to the Prayer Book in other places: New Rochelle and Albany come to mind. And it may be that the congregation gathered at the Pell Manor predated the building of Trinity Church in New York City. Within ten years the Episcopal Church would be firmly settled in a dozen or more other places in the province. This was almost entirely due to Thomas Bray and his colleagues. In February 1702, they decided to send six priests of the Church of England to New York.

The first to arrive was promising Patrick Gordon, bound for Jamaica, on Long Island. Alas, he died less than two weeks after arriving. Soon after, John Bartow arrived, assigned to Rye, Jamaica, and Westchester. These were satellite settlements, explicitly mentioned in the Ministries Act. Manhattan was already the heart, beginning to give life and direction to the surrounding villages. Before we see how the SPG embarked upon its work in New York, however, let us make one final survey of the situation in the province. We have seen that Governor Fletcher foresaw Episcopal parishes in various hamlets in the three counties near New York town, and a major one there, too. Trinity Church in New York had been founded in 1697, and had a resident rector by the time the SPG began sending missionaries to the province. There were enough Episcopalians in the outlying settlements such as Bedford, Rye, Jamaica, Richmond, to lend a hopeful picture to the Society's directors. Further, there were prominent landowners, some even empowered to style themselves lords of the manors, to urge the Church upon their tenants (and perhaps pay for its services). The royal governors, especially Fletcher and his successor, Bellomont, saw that their interests would not be hurt by growth of the Church of England. Upriver, there was promise for a church in Schenectady. As early as 1698 Lord Bellomont was fearful that the Jesuits might implant their insidious notions among the Indians before the Church of England could get to them.<sup>5</sup> Business interests no longer regarded New York as a wasteland fit only for a fort guarding the river to Albany. The entrepreneurs (like the governors, with whom they worked) found the Church a potential handmaid for their activities. Moreover, a new impetus had entered the English imagination: "a vague missionary feeling for the benefits of British rule extended."<sup>6</sup>

All together, then, it was the fullness of time for the Church of England in New York.

#### MISSION TO THE PALATINES: A NOBLE FAILURE?

A peculiar instance of SPG involvement in the colonization process took place in the settlement called East Camp (now Germantown), one hundred miles upriver from Manhattan. The story is a sad one. It begins with one of the early New York magnates, Robert Livingston. Soon after settling in Albany in the 1680s, Livingston managed to gain not only a wife with a notable dowry, but also patents for huge land holdings on the east bank of the river opposite the Blue Mountains, confirmed by each governor. Land was useless to proprietors unless there were people living on it. Now, it happened that in 1709 Queen Anne had, in London, a large number of refugees from her Palatinate possessions. Governor Hunter seized this opportunity to help his Queen, his friend Livingston—and himself. He arranged for the Crown to purchase a large area of Livingston's land with a view to transporting the Palatines there. Livingston was glad to sell, especially since he was permitted to write into the bargain a provision giving him the contract to feed the Germans. The Crown was attracted by the proposition that the Palatines could produce tar for the royal navy (though few pine trees of that sort were to be found in the Hudson River Valley). The Palatines, knowing London was but a temporary refuge, probably were eager to cross the Atlantic.

It was a cruel venture from beginning to end. "Packed into quarters too limited for cattle,"<sup>7</sup> many of the wretched Palatines died during the long voyage. Worse, once in the New World, they were quarantined aboard ship in New York Bay for much of the hot summer of 1710, and arrived at their new upriver home only toward autumn. Their houses that first winter were burrows quickly dug into hillsides, the entrances protected by canvas flaps. The next year those who survived produced some tar, but not nearly what had been promised. By 1712 even Governor Hunter had to admit the project was a failure (and some of his investment lost). The Palatines scattered up and down the river and also in new settlements west of Schenectady, becoming in time progenitors of many a worthy Hudson River family.

As early as May 1709 the SPG determined to send "a German minister" with the "poor Palatines." By this was meant a German clergyman ordained in the Church of England.<sup>8</sup> The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London wisely advised the directors not to "meddle therein" until Her Majesty's government had made a disposition of the

embarrassing campers in London. But, hearing that they would indeed soon embark upon their pitch-making enterprise, the SPG inquired about sending a clergyman with them. The Society seemed unaware that there was already a Calvinist clergyman, Joshua Kocherthal, with the Palatines. Nevertheless, six of the refugees "residing at Bable Bridge in St. Clare's, Southwark,"<sup>9</sup> knew of a German with Church of England ordination. They petitioned the "Society of Divines meeting at St. Paul's, London [on behalf of] Mr. John Frederick Haeger, whose care and unwearied diligence in propagating of your petitioner's spiritual welfare by his constant praying, preaching and visiting obligeth us humbly to desire his presence and continuance of his ministry among us."<sup>10</sup>

Haeger accompanied the Palatines on their "long and tedious" voyage. In a letter written from New York town to the secretary of the Society, he wrote,

I had hopes of transporting this people into the Church of Christ as by law established in England, but after my landing I found that the Lutheran minister in the country had made already a separation and administered the Holy Sacrament to such of his confession as arrived in the ship before ours; persuading them that they ought to stick by that, in which they were bred and born; which Mr. Kocherdal [sic] after his arrival confirmed also, in so much that the separation between the Reformed and the Lutherans is fully made.<sup>11</sup>

Joshua Kocherthal was granted £20 by the SPG in 1714.<sup>12</sup>

Not for the first time, nor for the last, had the Episcopalians supposed they could enlist the loyalties of those already persuaded otherwise. But Haeger, who was ordained deacon and priest in London just prior to his departure for the East Camp, was ever an optimist.<sup>13</sup> Very soon he informed the Society that he performed divine service in the City Hall of New York, and hoped a shipment of German prayer books would promote Episcopal worship, "as there is a want of liturgies in the German tongue." About the same time, Lewis Morris wrote the Society stating he had reason to think his Dutch neighbors in Fordham would "join the church in the Sacraments and other rites, had they the Dutch Common Prayer Book, and a minister who understood their language. I have taken some pains with one of their ministers Henricius Beyse, and have prevailed on him to accept Episcopal ordination."<sup>14</sup>

Much depended upon books. Haeger lamented that "a great many of the books bought for me by the Society have been spoiled by the sea-water." Throughout his valiant ministry among the Palatines, Haeger, like Morris, believed that the simple solution of having prayer books in translation would gather the people into the Church of England. His

letters also beg for a "summer gown" (that is, a lightweight Geneva preaching gown), and a surplice. He organized such congregation he was able to find in the English manner, "installing some of the oldest men as church wardens." He reported to the Society, from his temporary quarters in Manhattan, that

I have several times celebrated the holy communion, at which occasion I counted up six hundred members; of these I instructed fifty-two in the fundamentals of our religion according to the Church Catechism; among them were thirteen papists. Since my arrival I have married four couples and by baptism incorporated eight children into Christ and his Church. Many of the people died at Sea, and here, through fever; so that the number of the survivors amount to about two thousand. At present all of the people . . . have been shipped up the river to a certain tract of land. I intend, God willing, to follow them in the near future.<sup>15</sup>

The Society bolstered Haeger's spirits by promising that he would "be supplied with 100 Common prayer books in High Dutch as soon as they can be procured, and that he be acquainted that his salary is duly paid his attorney."<sup>16</sup> The SPG was also gratified that Robert Livingston had delivered forty boards "for ye School house in ye palatyeyn town." Neither school nor church was built, however, and Haeger still looked for those German prayer books. He said his congregation numbered 150 souls—clearly, most people had either returned to their Reformed and Lutheran allegiance by 1712, or had fled the camp. Within the year, Haeger could claim forty communicants at Schenectady, sixty miles northwest, and from this time we infer that he believed his ministry in East Camp would be less successful as more and more of the Palatines forsook their assigned place and moved to places more promising: "ye people under my care disperse themselves up and down throughout almost this whole government, intending to settle some lands for themselves and posterity as the only means for their subsistence."<sup>17</sup>

Haeger's efforts toward a new home for his people were based on the incontrovertible fact that the unfortunate settlers could never thrive in the wilderness of East Camp. Instead of improving with time, their condition grew worse. Haeger wrote:

The misery of these poor Palatines I every day behold has thrown me into such a fit of melancholy. . . . There has been a great famine among them this winter, and does hold on still, in so much that they boil grass and ye children eat the leaves of the trees. I have seen old men and women crie that it should almost have moved a stone. . . . I have served hitherto faithfully as Col. Heathcote and others can bear witness with a good conscience and should I now be forsaken in this remote land without any pay, or means of subsistence.<sup>18</sup>



Many of the Palatines moved to the Schoharie region, where Haeger visited them in 1716 and "had a large congregation. I preached several times and administered ye Holy Sacrament to seventy-four communicants." The German prayer books still hadn't arrived, however. Nor had the hoped-for church in East Camp been built. The Reformed and Lutheran congregations had built their churches, and Haeger had the governor's license to proceed with the Episcopal. The lumber lay upon the ground, squared and ready to be set up (though the SPG urged Haeger to wait until Barclay's church in Albany was completed). His optimism still in good repair, Haeger envisioned an English church at East Camp in the near future. The SPG record mentioned the "necessity for a pulpit cloth, communion table cloth, and vessel for the communion to enable him to perform the service with common decency."<sup>19</sup>

He proceeded to build "a little house and keep church in the same; which would hold about 200 people, the rest must stay without." Haeger was certain his efforts would meet with success because, as he reminded the SPG, his was the only English church between Kingston and Albany—a statement London might question, for there could be little reason to believe that the church in Dutch Calvinist Kingston was now English.

Perhaps because the East Camp tar-making experiment had failed, somewhat embarrassing Governor Hunter, disappointing the navy, and casting Livingston in the role of hardfisted landlord, the SPG decided to withdraw its support. Haeger was notified that his salary would not be continued beyond 1717. Even if the Society was not sensitive to the failures and disgrace involved in the Palatine matter, the fact that many of the immigrants had left East Camp made Haeger's work there peripheral to the Society's main purposes. It was suggested that "the New York establishment" might underwrite Haeger; presumably, this meant the government, not Trinity Church in New York. Haeger protested:

being a Church of England minister, and to please God I am resolved to die so and will not turn to any other church for any offer, and I am certain that the Church of England has no less care for their ministers than any other church as to let them perish and leave them to be mocked at . . .<sup>20</sup>

The Society, nevertheless, stood by its decision to terminate Haeger's stipends (if not by its promises to send the German prayer books). In 1716 a committee urged he be sent £50 "for his past services," that the governor be asked about the Palatine settlement, and whether or not Haeger was (as he claimed) still working there. The inquiry was pointless: Haeger died before the SPG could reach Governor Burnet. His

widow was granted the £50, paid into the hand of her new husband, SPG missionary John Ogilvie.

In his story of the Society engaged with the Palatines, we see both the strengths and the weaknesses of the SPG. Among the strengths are the regular examination (albeit from afar) of the work, the money at the Society's disposal, a certain harmony with civic leadership and, above all, the faithfulness of such missionaries as John Frederick Haeger. The weaknesses, however, are also there: the problems of long-distance oversight and the ensuing delay in communication are obvious. The East Camp experiment was a disgrace to its planners and a disaster to its participants. But could the Society lightly dismiss its missionary, or order him to abandon the miserable settlers who hadn't health or wit to move away? Haeger himself answered this query: paid or unpaid (we do not know), he remained in East Camp and from there supervised the building of the Schoharie church, whence many of his people had gone.

Finally, there is the problem of language in a Church which has always been aware of the rich inheritance implicit in its public worship. The SPG should have learned early in the Palatine affair that it was ill-equipped to compete—is that not the appropriate word?—for the loyalty of foreign-speaking people. In a notable enterprise on the banks of the Hudson River there was tried something that would, in future, become the norm of American life: people of one language entered upon a world where people of another language were ascendant, and determinedly so. In Manhattan the situation was somewhat ameliorated by usual urban customs. English and Dutch were used interchangeably for years to come. Dutch roots would always have a certain first-family dignity denied the lordly English. Stuyvesant to this day bears weight that Morris cannot. The SPG presumed for a brief time that it could make Prayer Book people out of Reformed and Lutheran Christians. Sensing what we today call the cultural gap, Haeger grasped at a very logical solution: prayer books in German. He never received them because they never existed.

While John Frederick Haeger—surely a martyr by any standard—was sharing the misery of East Camp, the Church of England was putting down stronger roots in other places.