

Eminent English Churchmen

By the Reverend Canon Arthur Middleton

The Layman Robert Nelson (1656-1715)

THE ATTRACTIVE FEATURES of High Churchmanship, as it came to be called, have at times been obscured under the odium and strife of party warfare. This was the situation in the reign of Queen Anne when 'High' and 'Low' Church became the watchwords of political faction. Despite the heat of debate contested not only in Parliament and Convocation, but also in taverns, coffee-shops and the inevitable pamphleteering, there were those High Churchmen renowned for their pure and primitive piety and lack of contentiousness. Robert Nelson belonged to this group of High Churchmen and he was a layman not a divine.

Biography

Robert Nelson, born in London in 1656, grew up in affluence as the son of a turkey merchant who died when his son was a child. Educated briefly at St. Paul's School, the greater part of his education was the responsibility of the Caroline Bishop George Bull whose biography he was to write. Although he entered as a fellow-commoner at Trinity College, Cambridge, he never resided. About 1679 he became a great friend of John Tillotson, a future Archbishop of Canterbury, and though their theological views diverged considerably there was mutual respect. Nelson nursed him in his last illness before he died in his arms. His school friend was the astronomer Edmund Halley, a fellow member of the Royal Society and after whom the comet was named. After refusing Charles II's offer of a place in his court because it would not be a happy place to live in, he travelled to Rome where he met the widow Lady Theophila Lucy and married her in 1681. Through Bossuet's influence she became a Roman Catholic on their return to England, and though this distressed him they remained devoted to each other. His first work written after his marriage was against the doctrine of Transubstantiation and demonstrates a quality in Nelson that despite tenaciously held opinions he could maintain cordial relations with those who differed from him. Dr. Hicke wrote, 'You can discourse with all sorts of men, with whom you differ in matters of religion, in the same easy and obliging manner as with those with whom you agree.'

During the reigns of William III and Anne, Nelson was at the centre of a group of churchmen who were concerned with good works and practical religious movements. In an age of lax morals and corruption in society they formed societies for the reformation of manners. Although a Jacobite and Nonjuror he found himself among distinguished churchmen of the day as one of the first members of SPCK at its formation in 1699 and sometimes chaired its weekly meetings. Similarly, he was involved in the formation of SPG and was a member of the board with people his nonjuring friends would find odious. In 1710 he was a commissioner for the erection of churches in London, worked for the promotion of parochial and clerical libraries, the advancing of Christian teaching in grammar schools, and the improvement of prisons.

His writing aimed at infusing a spirit of practical piety and the importance of church ordinances. His *Practice of True Devotion* (1698) reached twenty-two editions. In his *Christian Sacrifice* (1706) he defends the Eucharist as a sacrifice against the attacks of the day. His *Life of Bishop Bull* (1713) is a model biography. His *Companion to the Festivals and Fasts of the Church of England*, remained popular with succeeding generations of churchmen and sold 10,000 copies in the first four and a half years. In 1776, Dr. Johnson said that it was a best seller after the Bible. In a simple question and answer format this layman instructed countless Anglican laity and sees this as a fitting task 'for a layman ... when so many in the same rank attack religion'. There was no better way of using 'that leisure and command of time which the good providence of God has entrusted me with, than by consecrating it to this service.' He asks the reader to pray for the author since his fear is that in being 'solicitous about the salvation of others' he should not fail to secure his own.

His Friends

Among his friends were Bishops Bull, Ken and Beveridge, Dr. Hickes, Mr. Kettlewell and Mr. Spinckes, some of whom had been unable, like Nelson, to take the oaths to the recently established government and they were excluded from the ministry of the Church of England, though not from the services. They came to be known as the nonjurors. Nevertheless, they were thoroughly loyal to its doctrine and order.

George Bull was rector of Suddington near Dryfield, the family home after his father's death. Bull was one of the most profound and learned theologians of his day and later became Bishop of St. David's at the age of seventy. He became his tutor, his life and teaching greatly influencing Nelson and from him he learned his church principles. Bishop

Ken and Nelson were compatible in their whole tone of thought and devotion, their views on the disputed questions of the day coinciding. Ken believed that the Church of England was the faithful copy of the Ante-Nicene Church and rejoiced in the treasure of the primitive truth. They both had a great love of the Church of England in which they were nurtured and their primary purpose was to see its genuine principles established in it. They were impatient and unsympathetic with those who looked elsewhere for satisfaction. They both exhibited an unaffected devotional life, Nelson being especially influenced by Ken's *morning, evening and midnight hymns*. Such hymns as, *Awake my Soul*, and *Glory to Thee my God this night*, if repeated often Nelson believed would yield abundant fruit. This influenced Nelson's own devotional works. John Kettlewell, a fine preacher and regarded by Ken as a man of great sanctity, was also a bosom friend and helped Nelson with his work on *Festivals and Fasts* as was the scholarly and nonjuring dean of Worcester, Dr. Hckes. Another distinguished friend was William Beveridge, Bishop of St. Asaph, whom Nelson described in his biography of Bull as 'a pattern of true primitive piety'. These men of congenial devotion influenced Nelson's church views. In S. Spinckes', *The True Church of England Man's Companion to the Closet or A Complete Manual of Private Devotions*, collected from Andrewes, Ken, Laud, Hickes and Kettlewell, some prayers of Nelson also appear.

His Character

Men of all shades of opinion admired this man's character. Kettlewell's admiration was well-known and Hickes regarded Nelson's friendship as 'one of the providential blessings of his life.' Francis lee described him as 'a gentleman of that distinguished merit, as it may well be doubted whether he has left his fellow behind him in this great island.' Archbishop Tenison regarded him as 'a good and holy man now with God', and Dean Swift who despised the nonjurors could describe him as 'a very pious, learned, and worthy gentleman.' Attached to the 3^d Edition of Nelson's *Practice of True Devotion*, are these words signed by TW, that is suggested might be a misprint for S. W., Samuel Wesley.

Such were the lines; such majesty and grace
Chose to erect their throne in Nelson's face.
Where'er that pleasing form did once appear
The world confess'd-The Christian hero's here.

To others mild, as to himself sincere;

Polish'd though learn'd; obliging, yet sincere;
Justly with admiration seen and read;
For all must own the Christ was well bred.

Here was a higher type of gentleman than the fancy portrait. Added to this was another essential trait that must have contributed to his popularity, an eminent degree of common sense. This enabled him to join, on every possible occasion when he could do so without sacrifice of principle, with his friends who had not seceded.

In 1709 William Reeves, Rector of Cranford in Middlesex, published a dedication to Nelson in a Preface to the Apologies of Justin Martyr, Tertullian and Minucius Felix because he had encouraged him. 'You gave me the confidence to believe, that by a work of this nature I might do some service to the Christian faith, and the Christian morals, when some moderns were doing their best to reform us out of both.' Reeves went on to say about Nelson, 'having thus secured your principles upon the catholic foundation, your next care was to live, as well as believe as the primitive catholics did ... to make God your hope, your joy, your life, your all ... The devotions you have blessed the world with, best speak the abundance of your heart; for who can pray with that heavenly warmth and perfection, but one who is always at prayer?'

Nelson's opportunity of returning to the Church of England occurred in 1710 when the last but one of 'the invalidly deprived fathers,' Bishop Lloyd, died. Without sacrifice of principle but for the sake of the unity of the Church he returned on Easter Day 1711, receiving Holy Communion from his old friend Archbishop Sharp at St. Mildred's, Poultry.