

Review

The Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion by Alan Harding Oxford University Press, 2003. pp.xiii, 415. £65. ISBN 0-19-826369-4 hardback.

Two books have been written recently about the life of that remarkable eighteenth-century figure, Selina, Countess of Huntingdon. The late Edwin Welch's *Spiritual Pilgrim: A Reassessment of the Life of the Countess of Huntingdon* (Cardiff, 1995) is a fascinating and detailed account of the lady's life, made all the more valuable by the author's intimate knowledge of the Cheshunt archives. Boyd Stanley Schenther's *Queen of the Methodists: The Countess of Huntingdon and the Eighteenth-Century Crisis of Faith and Society* (Durham, 1997) sought to place the Countess within the intellectual milieu of the later eighteenth century. These have now been joined by the publication of Alan Harding's development of his doctoral thesis, *The Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion: A Sect in Action in Eighteenth-Century England*, as an Oxford Theological Monograph. Where this work breaks new ground is in its concentration upon the inner workings of this small sect which lay athwart the divide between the Established Church and Dissent.

Leicestershire interest lies in the fact that Selina, widow of the ninth Earl of Huntingdon, who died in 1746, decided to retire to Ashby Place, within the walls of the ruined castle at Ashby-de-la-Zouch. For the first two years of her widowhood she divided her time between Ashby Place and the ancestral seat at Donington Hall. Later, however, she was to spend more time in Chelsea and in Clifton near Bristol.

Lady Huntingdon became an enthusiast for the Evangelical Revival after her conversion to Methodism in July 1739, and was acquainted with John Wesley, George Whitefield, and Philip Doddridge on the one hand and Anglican Evangelicals like Henry Venn, William Romaine, Martin Madan, and Thomas Haweis on the other. Although agreeing initially with Wesley's Arminianism, she was later to change her mind, preferring instead the mild Calvinism of the Anglican Evangelicals. She wanted to make Anglican liturgy and Revival preaching available to the many people who would not attend their parish churches. So, in legal terms, the Huntingdon Connexion places of worship were initially not Dissenting chapels but Anglican private chapels of ease within parishes. They were served by itinerant preachers, some of whom were Anglican priests able to leave their parish churches in the charge of curates for a few weeks. As time went on more of the itinerants were untrained men (as were the Wesleyan Methodist local preachers) and she began to turn her attention to the possibility of providing tuition for them.

As Dr. Harding indicates, Lady Huntingdon helped with the building of a number of chapels in the 1760s. Others, like the one at Basingstoke, were affiliated because of the Connexion's preparedness to respond to calls for preaching. By 1770 there were ninety preaching circuits, some of them in the American colonies and in Sierra Leone. Because of the stress upon itinerancy there was a need for strong centralised control which Lady Huntingdon provided, albeit somewhat haphazardly. She took a close interest in the practical aspects of chapel building, in appointments to various positions, in how services were conducted, even in the choosing of hymns. It is little wonder that the Broadstairs congregation affectionately called her 'Mother Huntingdon'.

Harding's chapter on Trevecca College is particularly interesting. Lady Huntingdon was aware of the Dissenting academies, and the valuable work they did with students who were prevented from attending universities because they would not subscribe to the thirty-nine articles. In the early 1750s she had contributed to a scheme to establish an evangelical

academy in London and had also provided financial support for prospective ministers at Philip Doddridge's Northampton Academy. Eventually, however, she became convinced that the need was for a college that trained men principally for ministry, with the acquisition of learning as only a secondary consideration. Trevecca College, founded in 1768, was, therefore, a unique institution, a model for the Anglican St. Bees (1816) and other early nineteenth century colleges for clerical training. Harding concludes that, 'Despite its often ramshackle and ill-directed appearance Trevecca deserves its place – and an honoured one – in the history of ministerial training'.

By 1778 it was obvious that the Connexion would secede from the Church of England. There were several problems. The Trevecca students were more easily assimilated into Dissent than into Anglicanism. Bishops were reluctant to ordain men whose learning was questionable and whose experience of ministry was itinerant. Some of the congregations that belonged to the Connexion were more dissenting in character even though they used the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662) liturgy. At Worcester for instance the membership consisted of Baptists, Wesleyans, and Presbyterians. The actual split occurred over the Northampton chapel in London, where William Sellon, the incumbent of the local parish church of St. James in Clerkenwell, saw it as a threat. Sellon depended for his stipend mainly on fees and the voluntary subscriptions of his parishioners. The Connexion's chapel, offering Anglican services performed by clergymen, threatened to interfere with the latter source. Conversion of part of the land into a burial ground was the last straw for Sellon as it would have deprived him of burial fees also. Harding guides the reader skilfully through the Bishop of London's objections and the subsequent lengthy court proceedings to the point where the minister was licensed as a Dissenter, the chapel was registered as a Dissenting meeting house, and the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion had effectively seceded from the Church of England.

Despite the secession, however, there were many people within the Connexion who felt that the strength of their chapels lay in them 'being neither in the Church, nor wholly in dissent from it'. Harding indeed notes that, 'One of the paradoxes of the Revival was that, though superficially a reaction against the formalism of the established Church, it entailed for some of those it touched a rediscovery of the spiritual possibilities of the Church's liturgy and of the witness which the latter contained to key tenets of Reformation theology'.

In assessing Lady Huntingdon's achievement Harding correctly gives her credit for establishing a denomination that was to survive into the twentieth century. It had its own ordination of ministers, its own training college, and its own articles of religion. The latter are included in the book as Annex C. There is no doubt that her chapels 'established a commanding and distinctive presence on the Calvinist wing of the Revival'.

Unfortunately, when compared with Wesley, the Huntingdon contribution was deficient. Selina had many good qualities but she lacked the breadth and consistency of vision which the Methodist leader had in abundance. As Harding clearly states, 'There was no parallel.....to Wesley's sense of a people raised up in pursuit of a Gospel holiness that affected every facet of their lives'. Consequently the denomination lacked the robustness of Wesleyan Methodism. The Wesleyan Connexion was the home for Arminian evangelicals but Lady Huntingdon's Connexion 'was only one of a number of Calvinist evangelical groups'. Moreover there were no new developments in theology or distinctive schemes of church government.

Dr. Harding's book is highly readable; this reviewer found it difficult to put down. It is well-researched and elegantly written. How many people will purchase a book priced at £65 is open to question but those who do are in for a treat. It is an important contribution to eighteenth century church history.

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