JOHN MITCHINSON: CONTENDER FOR THE SUFFRAGAN BISHOPRIC OF LEICESTER

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A brilliant graduate of the University of Oxford, John Mitchinson built a reputation as a college fellow, a headmaster and bishop of Barbados. Like a number of colonial bishops, he returned to England before retirement to continue his career in the Anglican ministry. In 1881 he became rector of Sibson and an assistant bishop of Peterborough. He and the diocesan bishop, W. C. Magee, hoped that he would become the first suffragan bishop of Leicester in 1888, but this expectation was not fulfilled.

During the revival of Anglicanism in the second half of the nineteenth century the considerable size of dioceses was brought into question. For instance, Arthur Burns has noted that ‘Chester stretched from the Dee to the Lakes and incorporated the North Riding of Yorkshire’.\(^1\) Similarly, Peterborough diocese consisted of Northamptonshire, Rutland and Leicestershire. Francis Jeune, who was the bishop from 1864 to 1869, complained, with a touch of humour, that his diocese was ‘shaped like a pear’ and that he lived ‘on the end of the stalk’.\(^2\) Other dioceses were equally large and inconveniently shaped.

At the same time bishops were much more in evidence in their dioceses than they had been in the eighteenth century. The growing rail transport system encouraged them to travel more and visit more parishes: Jeune noted that he had used the new railway system to travel around the Peterborough diocese.\(^3\) Consequently, there were more services of confirmation.\(^4\) More was expected of the episcopal leader, who ‘could go to a parish church to institute its incumbent instead of instituting him at a brief ceremony in his house, get to know many of his clergy and their work, become a leader of his diocese at public meetings [and] even lead a week of missionary preaching’ in one of the growing industrial towns.\(^5\) All of this placed a greater strain on the diocesan bishops, most of whom were ageing men. Chadwick notes that ‘in the year 1868 every diocesan bishop from Land’s End to South London was too ill to work’.\(^6\)

When the system was reviewed it was obvious that either many of the dioceses would have to be sub-divided, or suffragan bishops would have to be appointed, to

assist the diocesan bishops. Already some bishops were availing themselves of the services of ex-colonial bishops, men who had been consecrated for service in the colonies, but who had retired early from their diocesan responsibilities because of ill-health or other reasons.

In the diocese of Peterborough, even though Bishop William Connor Magee gave much of his time to the Leicester Archdeaconry, it became clear that there was a need for additional episcopal oversight. Magee was 47 years old at the time of his consecration in 1868. By 1881 he was an ageing man with many health problems and by that time, if there had not been additional help, many confirmation services would not have been held. In 1888 he wrote wittily to a friend that ‘I have just brought out a third edition of my bronchial catarrh, with additions and improvements, and the editing has been a most trying process’.

Magee was pleased, therefore, to have in Leicestershire the formidable John Mitchinson, who was to be the cause of both delight and disappointment. This paper examines his contribution to the Church of England in Leicestershire, and the hopes and aspirations that were unfulfilled.

Mitchinson was a man with many talents. The posthumous son of a chaplain in the Merchant Service, he was born in Durham in 1833. From Durham School he won a scholarship to Pembroke College, Oxford, where he attained first-class honours in ‘mods’ (1853), and ‘greats’ and natural sciences (1855). He also became an able musician. From 1855 to 1881 he held a fellowship at Pembroke. He took a BCL and DCL at Oxford in 1864. In 1873 he was awarded a DD at Durham. He was headmaster of King’s School, Canterbury, from 1859 to 1873, at which time he was consecrated Bishop of Barbados and the Windward Islands. He was also co-adjutor bishop to the Bishop of Antigua from 1879.

As a bishop in Barbados he had been very energetic. Bishop Magee hoped that his scholarly demeanour and experience would be invaluable in the Peterborough diocese. It is, therefore, important to examine his background. In 1875 he secured the affiliation of the mission-founded Codrington College to the University of Durham, thus ensuring a stream of young graduate clergy for his diocese. By 1879 he was delighted to report that six students had achieved BA degrees. For most of 1880 he also acted as headmaster of Harrison College, a church secondary school.

Mitchinson did not suffer fools gladly. He had been a dominant headmaster of the King’s School, Canterbury, from 1859 to 1873, an occupation for which there was little need of diplomacy. He seemed to deal with Barbadian society as if he were still handling recalcitrant pupils. For instance, he acted for five consecutive months, as chaplain of a cemetery, where he noted with distaste the disregard for punctuality, the heartlessness and indifference of surviving relatives, and the pauper funerals where there were no mourners. He was scathing also in his criticism of the upper classes. At a ceremony for the conferring of degrees on distinguished members

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9 J. Mitchinson, Charge delivered in St. Michael’s Cathedral, Bridgetown, Barbados, 1879, p. 42. The author records his thanks to the staff of the Lambeth Palace Library for this and other references.
of the community, he complained about ‘the lack amongst the upper classes ...for that higher culture which develops breadth of thought and largeness of view, and the absence of which exhibits itself in an odious self-complacency and narrow prejudice, the offspring of besotted ignorance’. He went on to compare Barbadians generally with ‘the white snails’ of Hans Anderson, who ‘living under burdock leaves, upon which the raindrops pattern, flattered themselves that the world consisted of white snails, and that they were the world’.10

He was also adversely critical of church members, noting that ‘there has been far too general a feeling here....that the laity have no direct and personal interest in Church work. They are frequently the first and loudest to complain of shortcomings in Church ministrations....but beyond this they seldom interest themselves’. As a first step in improving matters he aimed to revive the office of churchwarden in the parishes.11

Mitchinson was extremely conscious of the Anglican Church’s perceived role as a via media between the extremes of Ritualism and Evangelicalism, and between Roman Catholicism and Nonconformity. In his first Charge he was dismayed to note that ‘there has been a disposition on the part of many English clergy to extravagant excess of ritual, alien alike to the recognised laws and traditions of the Anglican Church, and to the feeling of a large section of the faithful laity’. To counter this he insisted on knowing of any significant changes in clerical attire or altar furnishings each year. Although he stated that he would not prevent aspects of Ritualism, he knew that his own demands would be sufficient to curb excesses.12

There was no difficulty in co-operating with other denominations. Mitchinson was known to encourage Nonconformists. He declared forthrightly that ‘I seize on every opportunity to show them [the Methodists]....my appreciation of their zeal for Christ’s cause’.

He was known to be among the supporters of church unity, though he was for a time annoyed with the Welseyan Methodists because recently they had cut themselves off from any formal connection with Anglicanism, even though he acknowledged that Methodism ‘had high and holy aspirations [and] sought to rekindle the flame of vital religion, and to restore to our pulpits the spirit of prophecy’. Yet it was a problem because ‘it undervalued Church order and erelong issued in a disastrous schism’.14 Because of this, Mitchinson had felt unable to ‘promote the growth of Wesleyanism’, believing their attitude of separation ‘to be untenable’.15 However, he came to appreciate changes among the Wesleyans, recognising ‘a tacit and unafraid alliance with the Church in England, especially on the subjects of religious education and State establishment’.16

On the question of church unity specifically, Mitchinson was anxious that neither the Church of England nor the other denominations should give anything

10 Barbados website: www.anglican.bb (barbadosbishops/mitchinson).
11 J. Mitchinson, Charge delivered in St. Michael’s Cathedral, Bridgetown, Barbados, on March 5, 1974, p. 7.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., p. 30.
15 Mitchinson, Charge 1874, p. 30.
16 Ibid., p. 16.
away. For him there was no question of negotiation or diplomatic compromise. He believed, perhaps rather impractically, that each denomination, as it examined itself in the light of its convictions, would come up with ‘an honest and candid return to Apostolic doctrine and practice’.17

Alongside the question of church unity was that of extempore or free prayer, which many Nonconformists insisted upon as being more sincere. Mitchinson was discouraged by those who disparaged the Church tendency to provide for ‘the varied needs of modern life with appropriate liturgical forms’. To do that was ‘to admit that the Church has lost one of the most precious gifts of the Holy Spirit’. He accepted that there was a need for both liturgical and extempore prayer, but he was not prepared to surrender to ‘the vagaries of individual eccentricity to which the adoption of the Puritan Directory’ would lead.18

Mitchinson was particularly concerned about the preparation of children for the Christian life. When he arrived in Barbados he was disturbed to find that the average age of confirmation was 27. With his experience in schools he had arrived at the firm conviction that the parish clergy should ‘secure the young lads and girls before they quit your schools’. He aimed to hold a confirmation service in each parish in the diocese each year. In 1874 he had already held 22 confirmation services in Barbados and two in Tobago.19 Along with confirmation, he recognised the need to relate the Sunday schools to worship in the parish church. There ought to be, he stated, a short children’s service in the church ‘suited to the capacity of quite young children, with plenty of hymn-singing,....to precede morning or evening service’20.

One suspects that the frustrations of life in Barbados were causing him to lose, to some extent, his sense of judgement, leading to his premature resignation in 1881. Nevertheless, by the time of his departure he had left his mark. He was already the author of *Questions for Self-Examination on the Ten Commandments* (1872) and *Rudimentary Rules....for the use of beginners in Greek Prose Composition* (1872). To these were to be added *Sermons preached on special occasions* (1879) and several manuscripts of books to be published later.21 As an able musician, he was to publish, much later, in 1893, his *Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis in F: a Unison Chant Service*.

On his resignation from Barbados, Mitchinson’s contact with Pembroke College opened the possibility of a benefice of which the college owned the advowson. It was this which brought him to Leicestershire as Rector of Sibson (then known as Sibstone) in 1881. He was welcomed by Bishop Magee, who also appointed him as Assistant Bishop of Peterborough. Bishop Magee was so enthusiastic about Mitchinson that it was widely believed the diocesan bishop had appointed him as a coadjutor bishop, who would follow his own episcopacy in due course.22

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18 Ibid., p. 30.
21 Mitchinson’s books published (or republished) by Harmony (Barbados) were *Book of Animal Ignorance* (2007), *Book of General Ignorance* (2007) and *The Book of the Dead* (2010).
22 Foster (ed.), *Alumni Oxoniensis*, III, p. 964. Foster described Mitchinson as ‘coadjutor to bishop of Antigua 1879–82 and to bishop of Peterborough 1881’. The implication is that Mitchinson was the automatic successor to the bishops concerned.
In this appointment as Magee’s assistant he became one of a number of former colonial bishops who assisted English diocesan bishops. James Chapman returned from Colombo to assist in Bath and Wells. W. J. Trower returned from Gibraltar to assist in Exeter. George Selwyn, Bishop of Lichfield, who had himself returned from New Zealand, employed two of his former colleagues as assistant bishops. David Anderson, who had returned from Rupert’s Land on the Canadian prairies to become a canon of St Paul’s, London, was appointed an assistant bishop in London specifically for the purpose of conducting confirmation services. By the 1860s it had become an accepted practice to employ former colonial bishops in this manner.

However, there was some reluctance to accept this situation as normal. In 1868 the Lower House of Convocation deplored the practice. It was felt that it postponed necessary reform of the system and tended to encourage resignation from overseas dioceses. There were some who felt that service in the colonies was so different that their episcopal returnees were not really qualified to be functioning in England at that level. Those who were keen to reform the system seized upon the legislation of Henry VIII, which permitted the appointment of suffragan bishops. In 1869, Prime Minister Gladstone, who preferred to ignore the demand for smaller dioceses, decided that the Tudor legislation should be resuscitated, so that suffragans could be appointed to assist those bishops who were most hard-pressed.

In 1870, two suffragans were appointed: in Dover to support the Archbishop of Canterbury; and in Nottingham to help the Bishop of Lincoln. Others were soon to follow. The most famous of these suffragans, appointed in 1879, was William Walsham How, who was not a great preacher – one sermon of his was described by Magee as ‘suitable, earnest and nearly eloquent’ – but was a magnificent pastoral worker in East London and a prolific composer of hymns. It was he who set the pace for suffragan bishops until he was translated to Wakefield as diocesan bishop in 1888. Generally speaking, though, the diocesan bishops were suspicious of the proposals for suffragans, and one suspects that some appointees were chosen because they were good pastoral workers rather than preachers, leaving the diocesans to offer leadership, and to be preachers and teachers.

For a gifted man like Mitchinson his parish was not sufficiently challenging in itself. It had been badly hit by agricultural depression, so that the population was gradually diminishing (from 381 in 1881 to 342 in 1901). He soon turned his attention to the archdeaconry, where Henry Fearon, the Archdeacon of Leicester (and Rector of All Saints’ in Loughborough), had been in office since 1863, and was in 1883 an ailing man of 82 years. Mitchinson offered to deputise for him in Leicester, and suggested to Magee that (since the diocesan bishop was also sickly) the institutions to livings in Leicestershire be in the bishop’s palace chapel in Peterborough, and that the inductions to livings be carried out in the parishes by Fearon or himself.

23 Chadwick, Victorian Church, II, p. 344.
24 Ibid.
26 Ibid., p. 346; Macdonnell, Life and Correspondence of W. C. Magee, II, p. 251.
27 Macdonnell, Life and Correspondence of W. C. Magee, II, p. 252.
When Archdeacon Fearon retired, a year before his death, his successor was Assheton Powell, the 62-year-old Rector of South Kilworth. However, he died in 1886, only two years into the appointment, leaving as his successor the Rector of Sibson. There can be little doubt that Mitchinson was not appointed in 1886 because he was being reserved for possible appointment as a suffragan bishop in the near future. By 1888, however, Magee knew that the other person to be nominated was already an archdeacon, so that an appointment of Mitchinson as an archdeacon would strengthen his *curriculum vitae*.

There had already been discussions about a Leicester bishopric. Magee had willingly accepted that there would ultimately be a diocese of Leicester. He had grown tired of trying to cope with a divided diocese 'where everything had to be done in duplicate', and members of the Diocesan Conference had been stating their preference for two separate diocese. The creation of a Suffragan Bishop of Leicester, it was felt, would go some way to appeasing the concerns of people in the Leicester archdeaconry. In 1885, Magee wrote to Mitchinson, stating that 'as regards the suffragan question, I am, as I have said, quite willing to submit a proposal to the Government'. He saw, however, that there were two difficulties. First, he noted that the 'Act of Henry VIII....provides for the *consecration* of Suffragan Bishops, and therefore would seem to be inapplicable to the case of an already consecrated bishop'. Second, he stated that 'I must according to the Act submit *two* names to the Crown for selection'. He acknowledged that he was 'dreading the leaving....to the unfettered choice of the Crown the appointment of a possible suffragan other than the one I wish for'. He continued:

> The case is quite different from that of a diocese in which there is....no assistant bishop. In that case the diocesan bishop sends up the names of two men, either of whom would suit him well. But in your case I send up two names, one of whom I wish for, and who wishes it himself, and the other whom I do not particularly wish for, and could only be appointed by passing over you.30

It is quite obvious that Magee was fearful about the possible appointment of the other candidate. Accordingly, he was keen to advance Mitchinson's candidature by any means possible. Yet he had his limitations. The other name submitted was that of Francis Henry Thicknesse, who, after 11 years as the bishop’s chaplain, had been appointed Archdeacon of Northampton in 1875. He had no connections with Leicestershire. Although he had been a scholar at Brasenose College, Oxford, it could not be claimed that he was on the same academic level as Mitchinson.

Thicknesse, however, had some advantages. There were clerical connections. He was the second son of the Reverend William H. Coldwell, Rector of St Mary’s, Stafford, and Prebendary of Lichfield Cathedral. In 1855 he had married Anne, daughter and sole heiress of Ralph Anthony Thicknesse, MP for Wigan and Deputy Lieutenant for Lancashire, and whose surname he adopted.31 He was also

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31 J. Foster (ed.), *Alumni Oxoniensis*, p. 1402; H. I. Longden (ed.), Northamptonshire and Rutland Clergy from 1500, XIII, p. 185.
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well-established as the incumbent of Brackley, Northamptonshire, to which he was appointed in 1868. Moreover, he was also an honorary canon of Manchester from 1863 to 1875, presumably through family connections. He was also non-controversial.

In the end it is likely that a combination of Thicknesse’s connections, prejudice against former colonial bishops, and memories of Mitchinson’s difficulties in Barbados, as well as his schoolmasterly demeanour, decided the issue. Once the suffragan’s post had been determined the Bishop of Peterborough submitted the names of Mitchinson and Thicknesse, with the former as the first name, indicating his preference. Magee’s only comment was that ‘I have saved the suffraganship for the diocese, and certainly, whatever happens, it is not my doing’. One suspects that he knew the wrong man was to be appointed. On 15 July 1888, he wrote to his friend, Macdonnell, that ‘at last the Suffragan Bishopric of Leicester is an accomplished fact. Thicknesse and Billing were consecrated today’.

There was little rejoicing in Leicester. The Leicester Daily Mercury reported the service of consecration in Westminster Abbey, but without comment. The only response to Thicknesse was contained two days later in a report of the inaugural meeting of the Humberstone, Evington and District Conservative Association, when J. F. L. Rolleston, JP, proposed a toast to ‘The Bishops and Clergy’. He noted that ‘the interest the Bishop took in the town was shown by the fact that he thought it worthy to be placed under the special charge of a deputy’. Rolleston went on to say that he believed Bishop Thicknesse ‘would fill the office with dignity, honour, and credit to himself’.

The Leicester Journal was rather muted in its coverage of the appointment and consecration. It came in the form of a leader in which the main concern seemed to be to praise the sermon preached by William Walsham How, who had just been appointed Bishop of Wakefield, and ‘who will perhaps always be best known as the “good Bishop of East London”’. Without even mentioning the name of the newly consecrated suffragan, the leader continued:

Just as the Bishop of Wakefield is a prelate of whom his diocese is proud in common with the whole country, we may be certain that the new Bishop of Leicester will in like manner win the esteem and even affection of all those with whom he may come into contact...., whether Churchmen or Nonconformists.

As far as Leicestershire was concerned the new suffragan bishop was almost completely unknown. Bishop Mitchinson, despite his disappointment, continued to be immersed in local church affairs. He served as the Archdeacon of Leicester. He was also a rural dean and an active member of the Archidiaconal Board of Education. Also, because he was on the spot and able to respond to emergencies quickly and effectively, he was the de facto Bishop of Leicester. There is no doubt that Magee

32 Macdonnell, Life and Correspondence of W. C. Magee, II, p. 251.
33 Leicester Daily Mercury, 16 July 1888.
34 Ibid., 19 July 1888.
35 Leicester Journal, 20 July 1888.
36 Peterborough Diocesan Calendar, 1891 and 1900.
regarded him as such. When the diocesan bishop was taken ill, just before he was to take several confirmation services in Leicestershire, he noted that ‘Mitchinson came to my rescue, nobly and unasked. By crowding three Confirmations in a day and uniting centres, he actually managed to pick up four of my dropped stitches, and will take all the rest next week’.37

All this was done without neglecting his own parish. He was clearly the dominant figure when, under the terms of the Local Government Act 1894, the Sibson Parish Council was set up as a unit of local government. At the first meeting, Mitchinson was elected chairman, and in schoolmasterly fashion immediately set about defining and establishing the rules and standing orders. He was careful to insist ‘that the Chairman be sole judge of the relevancy of an amendment, and may call to order any member not speaking to the point, or repeating himself or otherwise acting disorderly’. As well as taking the chairmanship it was voted that ‘for the present the Chairman do take the Minutes of the Meeting’. Mitchinson continued to be both chairman and secretary for the first four years of the parish council’s existence.38

It was noticeable, however, that Mitchinson’s name suddenly disappeared from the Minutes in 1897. Apparently there were no regrets about his absence or, after 1899, any recognition of his departure for the Mastership of Pembroke College. One wonders whether he might have been as acerbic with the parishioners as he had been decades earlier with the Barbadians.

Magee’s opinion of the qualities of Mitchinson did not change. It is significant that when Magee learnt that he was to be translated to York in 1891, he wrote to Mitchinson, saying:

I owe it to you, more almost than to anyone else, to give you the earliest intimation of my appointment to the Archbishopric of York…. It grieves me that I shall find no Bishop Mitchinson at York. There is a Suffragan there, but he cannot be to me all that you have been for years past. I fear that you have spoiled me for any other suffragan or assistant bishop.39

It is possible that, as Archbishop of York, Magee thought he might be able to further Mitchinson’s cause. However, Magee’s demise in an influenza epidemic occurred only a month after his translation.

Mitchinson in the meantime had maintained his academic contacts. He had been the Ramsden Preacher at Cambridge in 1883. He had become a Fellow of Lichfield Theological College in 1887. He had also renewed his association with Pembroke College, as an Honorary Fellow in 1883. When there was no further preferment in the Church, in 1899, when he was in his 67th year, he was invited to become Master of Pembroke, which carried with it a canonry of Gloucester Cathedral. He also became a Fellow of Taunton College in 1900 and an Honorary Fellow of Denstone College in 1910. For a short time he was also an Assistant Bishop of Gloucester.

Even these posts were not enough to satisfy such an energetic man as Mitchinson. He also renewed his scientific interests, giving his name to the newly discovered

37 Macdonnell, Life and Correspondence of W. C. Magee, II, p. 267.
38 Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester & Rutland, DE373/76 (Sibson Vestry & Parish Meeting Minutes, 1893–1933).
39 Macdonnell, Life and Correspondence of W. C. Magee, II, p. 297.
trilobites mitchinsonii. He became president of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society in 1905–06, giving a presidential address on ‘Monastic and Kindred Institutions of Bristol and Gloucestershire’. He also took an active interest in the Woodard Corporation’s schools and was active in the formation of the Headmasters’ Conference. Furthermore, he maintained his connection with the Diocese of Peterborough, remaining as an assistant bishop until 1914. He even returned to administer the diocese during Bishop Carr Glyn’s illness in 1902. He died in 1918, aged 85 years, 45 years after his consecration as a bishop.40 There can be no doubt that John Mitchinson would have been an excellent choice as the first Suffragan Bishop of Leicester.
