

THE
CHRISTIAN LEADERS
OF
The Last Century;
OR,
ENGLAND A HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

By the
REV. J. C. RYLE, B.A.,
Christ Church, Oxford;
AUTHOR OF "EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS;" &c.

"Enquire, I pray thee, of the former age, and prepare thyself to the search of
their fathers."—JOB viii. 8.

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I.

The Religious and Moral Condition of England

AT THE
BEGINNING OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

Importance of the History of the Eighteenth Century—Political and Financial Position of England—Low State of Religion both in Churches and Chapels—Testimonies on the subject—Defects of Bishops and Clergy—Poverty of the Printed Theology—Wretched Condition of the Country as to Education, Morals, and popular Literature—The “Good Old Times” a mere Myth.

THE subject I propose to handle in this volume is partly historical and partly biographical. If any reader expects from the title a fictitious tale, or something partly drawn from my imagination, I fear he will be disappointed. Such writing is not in my province, and I have no leisure for it if it was. Facts, naked facts, and the stern realities of life, absorb all the time that I can spare for the press.

I trust, however, that with most readers the subject I have chosen is one that needs no apology. The man who feels no interest in the history and biography of his own country is surely a poor patriot and a worse philosopher.

“Patriot” he cannot be called. True patriotism will make an Englishman care for everything that concerns England. A true patriot will like to know something about every one who has left his mark on English character, from the Venerable Bede down to Hugh Stowell, from Alfred the Great down to Pounds, the originator of Ragged Schools.

“Philosopher” he certainly is not. What is philosophy but history teaching by examples? To know the steps by which England has reached her present position is essential to a right understanding both of our national privileges and our national dangers. To know the men whom God raised up to do his work in days gone by, will guide us in looking about for standard-bearers in our own days and days to come.

I venture to think that there is no period of English history which is so thoroughly instructive to a Christian as the middle of last century. It is the period of which we are feeling the influence at this very day. It is the period with which our grandfathers and great-grandfathers were immediately connected. It is a period, not least, from which we may draw most useful lessons for our own times.

Let me begin by trying to describe the actual condition of England a hundred years ago. A few simple facts will suffice to make this plain.

The reader will remember that I am not going to speak of our *political* condition. I might easily tell him that, in the days of Sir Robert Walpole, the Duke of Newcastle, and the elder Pitt, the position of England was very different from what it is now. Great statesmen and orators there were among us, no doubt. But our standing among the nations of the earth was comparatively poor, weak, and low. Our voice among the nations of the earth carried far less weight than it has since obtained. The foundation of our Indian Empire had hardly been laid. Our Australian possessions were a part of the world only just discovered, but not colonized. At home there was a strong party in the country which still longed for the restoration of the Stuarts. In 1745 the Pretender and a Highland army marched from Scotland to invade England, and got as far as Derby. Corruption, jobbing, and mismanagement in high- places were the rule, and purity the exception. Civil and religious disabilities still abounded. The test and corporation Acts were still unrepealed. To be a Dissenter was to be regarded as only one degree better than being seditious and a rebel. Rotten boroughs flourished. Bribery among all classes was open, unblushing, and profuse. Such was England politically a hundred and fifty years ago.

The reader will remember, furthermore, that I am not going to speak of our condition in a *financial and economical* point of view. Our vast cotton, silk, and linen manufactures had hardly begun to exist. Our enormous mineral treasures of coal and iron were scarcely touched. We had no steam-boats, no locomotive engines, no railways, no gas, no electric telegraph, no penny post, no scientific farming, no macadamized roads, no free-trade, no sanitary arrangements, and no police deserving the name. Let any Englishman imagine, if he can, his country without any of the things that I have just mentioned, and he will have some faint idea of the economical, and financial condition of England a hundred years ago.

But I leave these things to the political economists and historians of this world. Interesting as they are, no doubt, they form no part of the subject that I want to dwell upon. I wish to treat that subject as a minister of Christ's gospel. It is the *religious and moral* condition of England a hundred years ago to which I shall confine my attention. Here is the point to which I wish to direct the reader's eye.

The state of this country in a religious and moral point of view in the middle of last century was so painfully unsatisfactory that it is difficult to convey any adequate idea of it. English people of the present day who have never been led to inquire into the subject, can have no conception of the darkness that prevailed. From the year 1700 till about the era of the French Revolution, England seemed barren of all that is really good. How such a state of things can have arisen in a land of free Bibles and professing Prot-

estantism is almost past comprehension. Christianity seemed to lie as one dead, insomuch that you might have said “she is dead.” Morality, however much exalted in pulpits, was thoroughly trampled under foot in the streets. There was darkness in high places and darkness in low places—darkness in the court, the camp, the Parliament, and the bar—darkness in country, and darkness in town—darkness among rich and darkness among poor—a gross, thick, religious and moral darkness—a darkness that might be felt.

Does any one ask what the churches were doing a hundred years ago? The answer is soon given. The Church of England existed in those days, with her admirable articles, her time-honoured liturgy, her parochial system, her Sunday services, and her ten thousand clergy. The Nonconformist body existed, with its hardly won liberty and its free pulpit. But one account unhappily may be given of both parties. They existed, but they could hardly be said to have lived. They did nothing; they were sound asleep. The curse of the Uniformity Act seemed to rest on the Church of England. The blight of ease and freedom from persecution seemed to rest upon the Dissenters. Natural theology, without a single distinctive doctrine of Christianity, cold morality, or barren orthodoxy, formed the staple teaching both in church and chapel. Sermons everywhere were little better than miserable moral essays, utterly devoid of anything likely to awaken, convert, or save souls. Both parties seemed at last agreed on one point, and that was to let the devil alone, and to do nothing for hearts and souls. And as for the weighty truths for which Hooper and Latimer had gone to the stake, and Baxter and scores of Puritans had gone to jail, they seemed clean forgotten and laid on the shelf.

When such was the state of things in churches and chapels, it can surprise no one to learn that the land was deluged with infidelity and scepticism. The prince of this world made good use of his opportunity. His agents were active and zealous in promulgating every kind of strange and blasphemous opinion. Collins and Tindal denounced Christianity as priestcraft. Whiston pronounced the miracles of the Bible to be grand impositions. Woolston declared them to be allegories. Arianism and Socinianism were openly taught by Clark and Priestly, and became fashionable among the intellectual part of the community. Of the utter incapacity of the pulpit to stem the progress of all this flood of evil, one single fact will give us some idea. The celebrated lawyer, Blackstone, had the curiosity, early in the reign of George III., to go from church to church and hear every clergyman of note in London. He says that he did not hear a single discourse which had more Christianity in it than the writings of Cicero, and that it would have been impossible for him to discover, from what he heard, whether the preacher were a follower of Confucius, of Mahomet, or of Christ!

Evidence about this painful subject is, unhappily, only too abundant. My difficulty is not so much to discover witnesses, as to select them. This was the period at which Archbishop Seeker said, in one of his charges, "In this we cannot be mistaken, that an open and professed disregard of religion is become, through a variety of unhappy causes, the distinguishing character of the age. Such are the dissoluteness and contempt of principle in the higher part of the world, and the profligacy, intemperance, and fearlessness of committing crimes in the lower part, as must, if the torrent of impiety stop not, become absolutely fatal. Christianity is ridiculed and railed at with very little reserve; and the teachers of it without any at all." This was the period when Bishop Butler, in his preface to the "Analogy," used the following remarkable words: "It has come to be taken for granted that Christianity is no longer a subject of inquiry; but that it is now at length discovered to be fictitious. And accordingly it is treated as if, in the present age this were an agreed point among all persons of discernment, and nothing remained but to set it up as a principal subject for mirth and ridicule." Nor were such complaints as these confined to Churchmen. Dr. Watts declares that in his day "there was a general decay of vital religion in the hearts and lives of men, and that it was a general matter of mournful observation among all who lay the cause of God to heart." Dr. Guyse, another most respectable Nonconformist, says, "The religion of nature makes up the darling topic of our age; and the religion of Jesus is valued only for the sake of that, and only so far as it carries on the light of nature, and is a bare improvement of that kind of light. All that is distinctively Christian, or that is peculiar to Christ, everything concerning him that has not its apparent foundation in natural light, or that goes beyond its principles, is waived, and banished and despised." Testimony like this might easily be multiplied tenfold. But I spare the reader. Enough probably has been adduced to prove that when I speak of the moral and religious condition of England at the beginning of the eighteenth century as painfully unsatisfactory, I do not use the language of exaggeration.

What were the bishops of those days? Some of them were undoubtedly men of powerful intellect and learning, and of unblameable lives. But the best of them, like Seeker, and Butler, and Gibson, and Lowth, and Horn, seemed unable to do more than deplore the existence of evils which they saw but knew not how to remedy. Others, like Lavington and Warburton, fulminated fierce charges against enthusiasm and fanaticism, and appeared afraid of England becoming too religious! The majority of the bishops, to say the truth, were mere men of the world. They were unfit for their position. The prevailing tone of the Episcopal body may be estimated by the fact, that Archbishop Cornwallis gave balls and routs at Lambeth Palace

until the king himself interfered by letter and requested him to desist.* Let me also add, that when the occupants of the Episcopal bench were troubled by the rapid spread of Whitefield's influence, it was gravely suggested in high quarters that the best way to stop his influence was to make him a bishop.

What were the parochial clergy of those days? The vast majority of them were sunk in worldliness, and neither knew nor cared anything about their profession. They neither did good themselves, nor liked any one else to do it for them. They hunted, they shot, they farmed, they swore, they drank, they gambled. They seemed determined to know everything except Jesus Christ and him crucified. When they assembled it was generally to toast "Church and King," and to build one another up in earthly-mindedness, prejudice, ignorance, and formality. When they retired to their own homes, it was to do as little and preach as seldom as possible. And when they did preach, their sermons were so unspeakably and indescribably bad, that it is comforting to reflect they were generally preached to empty benches.

What sort of theological literature did this period bequeath to us? The poorest and weakest in the English language. This is the age to which we owe such divinity as that of the "Whole Duty of Man," and the sermons of Tillotson and Blair. Inquire at any old bookseller's shop, and you will find there is no theology so unsaleable as the sermons published about the middle and latter part of the 18th century.

What sort of education did the lower orders possess? In the greater part of parishes, and especially in rural districts, they had no education at all.

* The king's letter on this occasion is so curious, that I give it in its entirety, as I find it in that interesting though ill-arranged book, "The Life and Times of Lady Huntingdon." The letter was evidently written in consequence of an interview which Lady Huntingdon had with the king. A critical reader will remember that the king was probably more familiar with the German than the English language.

"MY GOOD LORD PRELATE,—I could not delay giving you the notification of the grief and concern with which my breast was affected at receiving authentic information that routs have made their way into your palace. At the same time, I must signify to you my sentiments on this subject, which hold these levities and vain dissipations as utterly inexpedient, if not unlawful, to pass in a residence for many centuries devoted to divine studies, religious retirement, and the extensive exercise of charity and benevolence; I add, in a place where so many of your predecessors have led their lives in such sanctity as has thrown lustre on the pure religion they professed and adorned. From the dissatisfaction with which you must perceive I behold these improprieties, not to speak in harsher terms, and on still more pious principles, I trust you will suppress them immediately; so that I may not have occasion to show any further marks of my displeasure, or to interpose in a different manner. May God take your grace into his almighty protection.—I remain, my Lord Primate, your gracious friend, G R."

Nearly all our rural schools have been built since 1800. So extreme was the ignorance, that a Methodist preacher in Somersetshire was charged before the magistrates with swearing, because in preaching he quoted the text, "He that believeth not shall be damned!" While, not to be behind Somersetshire, Yorkshire furnished a constable who brought Charles Wesley before the magistrates as a favourer of the Pretender, because in public prayer he asked the Lord to "bring back his banished ones!" To cap all, the vice-chancellor of Oxford actually expelled six students from the University because "they held Methodistic tenets, and took on them to pray, read, and expound Scripture in private houses." To swear extempore, it was remarked by some, brought an Oxford student into no trouble; but to pray extempore was an offence not to be borne!

What were the morals of this period? It may suffice to say that duelling, adultery, fornication, gambling, swearing, Sabbath-breaking and drunkenness were hardly regarded as vices at all. They were the fashionable practices of people in the highest ranks of society, and no one was thought the worse of for indulging in them. The best evidence of this point is to be found in Hogarth's pictures.

What was the popular literature of this time? I pass over the fact that Bolingbroke, and Gibbon, and Hume the historian, were all deeply dyed with scepticism? I speak of the light reading which was most in vogue. Turn to the pages of Fielding, Smollett, Swift, and Sterne, and you have the answer. The cleverness of these writers is undeniable; but the indecency of many of their writings is so glaring and gross, that few people now-a-days would like to allow their works to be seen on their drawing-room table.

My picture, I fear, is a very dark and gloomy one. I wish it were in my power to throw a little more light into it. But facts are stubborn things, and specially facts about literature. The best literature of this period is to be found in the moral writings of Addison, Johnson, and Steele. But the effects of such literature on the general public, it may be feared, was infinitesimally small. In fact, I believe that Johnson and the essayists had no more influence on the religion and morality of the masses than the broom of the renowned Mrs. Partington had on the waves of the Atlantic Ocean.

To sum up all, and bring this part of my subject to a conclusion, I ask my readers to remember that the good works with which everyone is now familiar did not then exist in our country. Wilberforce had not yet attacked the slave trade. Howard had not yet reformed prisons. Raikes had not established Sunday schools. We had no Bible Societies, no ragged schools, no city missions, no pastoral aid societies, no missions to the heathen. The spirit of slumber was over the land. In a religious and moral point of view, England was sound asleep.

I cannot help remarking, as I draw this chapter to a conclusion, that we ought to be more thankful for the times in which we live. I fear we are far too apt to look at the evils we see around us, and to forget how much worse things were a hundred years ago. I have no faith, for my part, and I boldly avow it, in those “good old times” of which some delight to speak. I regard them as a mere fable and a myth. I believe that our own times are the best times that England has ever seen. I do not say this boastfully. I know we have many things to deplore; but I do say that we might be worse. I do say that we were much worse a hundred years ago. The general standard of religion and morality is undoubtedly far higher. At all events, at present, we are awake. We see and feel evils to which a hundred years ago, men were insensible. We struggle to be free from these evils; we desire to amend. This is a vast improvement. With all our many faults we are not sound asleep. On every side there is stir, activity, movement, progress, and not stagnation. Bad as we are, we confess our badness; weak as we are, we acknowledge our failings; feeble as our efforts are, we strive to amend; little as we do for Christ, we do try to do something. Let us thank God for this! Things might be worse. Comparing our own days with the middle of the 18th century, we have reason to thank God and take courage.