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DISSENT TRANSFORMED

That the fifty years between 1780 and 1830 were crucial years in the history of dissent is clearly demonstrated by Deryck Lovegrove in *Established Church, Sectarian People: the subtitle Itinerancy and the Transformation of Dissent* (CUP 1988, 254pp, £30-00) clarifies the theme. The context was an England challenged by the ferment of incipient industrialism with outdated institutions at home and the demands of a long-extended war abroad, followed by years of dislocated peace. The story told is essentially a provincial one, embracing a wide variety of contrasting situations.

Dissent's opportunity was provided by the failures of the established church: 'The twofold weakness of the Hanoverian Church, the social alienation arising from clerical poverty and that which stemmed from the opposite condition, combined by

the end of the century to enhance the attractiveness of newer, more vigorous and more socially relevant forms of Christianity.' (p.13) The engines of the expansion of dissenting religion were, first, the emergence of new evangelical academies, secondly and the supplementation of the older attachment to the autonomy of each local congregation by the establishment of a number of itinerancies, which, thirdly, occasioned new variety in the ministerial office. In this process, as also through the impact of the new concern for overseas mission, the inherited Calvinism required 'moderation'. Lovegrove rightly chastises no less than R. W. Dale for his frequently-quoted judgment that moderate Calvinism was 'Calvinism in decay', properly arguing that Dale's high regard for the historic high-churchmanship of Puritanism was misplaced in so far as, condoning the weaknesses of old dissent in terms of its missionary failure, it undervalued the new vitality that reawakened dissent at this time. Nor was the new movement mindless: a new missionary theology undergirded the evangelistic outreach that was transforming the previously inward-looking congregations of protestant dissent. Dale's fears, however, were justified in so far as the new societies were better at securing 'hearers' or adherents rather than fully committed members. Thus Lovegrove argues that 'by diluting the element of commitment it affected a fundamental change away from the serious character of eighteenth-century Dissent with its strongly doctrinal emphasis' (p.164), suggesting that much rural dissent as a consequence lacked clear denominational commitments.

Particular Baptist churches and associations now began to add missionary imperatives to their traditional confessions of Calvinist sympathies. An infant Baptist Missionary Society deployed part of its resources in home-mission activity in the west country. Associations were rejuvenated; some, indeed, were created for the first time, and given a newly-urgent evangelistic purpose. Internal opposition, therefore, from extremes of socinianism and antinomianism within the dissenting confraternity counted for little in practical terms. By contrast the Established Church, and the landlords who supported it, were the more hostile because of the political atmosphere created by the French Revolution and subsequent wars during which the legal position of Protestant Dissent came under direct threat. From time to time there were also outbreaks of popular opposition but these had not the consistency or durability of the hostility of the Establishment. The Church opposed what it saw as a species of lay evangelism carried out by 'illiterate peasants' and 'mechanics'. Lovegrove, by contrast, stresses the range of preachers. Some were certainly laymen, but others were settled ministers or specialist agents who often worked well-defined itinerancies, sometimes supported by national Societies, sometimes prompted by more local initiatives, often working a set route from some central base.

Such a work-force received training in the new generation of Dissenting Academies, which modelled themselves upon the Trevecca example and normally embraced some form of student itinerancy within their schemes of training. Lovegrove claims that 'the interest in itinerancy schemes by the long-established Baptist academy at Bristol, and by the new foundations at Bradford and Stepney, owed as much to the demonstrable success of Whitfieldite theological education exemplified in Trevecca as it did to any personal insight of Baptist leaders such as Andrew Fuller, Hugh and Caleb Evans, and Robert Hall senior.'(p.69). Here, of course, itinerancy was wedded to scholarship, raising its practice above the common charge of unlearned ignorance; indeed, in due course the academic function seemed to outweigh the more practical concern for the training of effective evangelists, so that the new evangelical academies came to differ little from the old.

The hope was that the success of the whole enterprise would see the collection of gathered congregations, with some of the erstwhile evangelists called to be their settled pastors. At the same time the flexibility of individual initiatives in

sponsorship gave way to more institutional forms of support, many of which found it difficult to secure sufficient and consistent financial backing. This, in itself, prompted a constant demand for visible results to woo subscribers. The itinerants were assisted in their task by the work of the several tract societies and their colporteurs; but in the more institutional atmosphere of the 1830s, preaching moved from the open-second-air indoors, so that chapel building now threatened to consume a disproportionate share of available resources. The spontaneity of the 1790s had been routinised by the new pressures of denominationalism. The historical analysis here deserves a place on the agenda of contemporary denominational leaders. Lovegrove writes: 'The desire for denominational action may have produced a systematic and efficient approach to the organization of evangelism, but there is little reason to suppose that the results were more remarkable than those already achieved through the spontaneous application of local and individual effort.'(p.161)

In the conflict between Church and Dissent, focused in the hostility to dissenting itinerancy, two views of English society stood opposed, the one static, closed and established, the other dynamic, open and pluralist. The second emphasis, by implication challenged the very being of the former, quite apart from the Jacobin tendencies that conservative clergymen saw lurking behind a public front of evangelistic quietism. The political charges were hard to prove, but as itinerancy succeeded so an increasing number of thriving congregations across the English counties made the real pluralism of English religious life abundantly clear. All this was the background to Lord Sidmouth's attempts to restrict the Toleration Act by his proposals of 1811 to contain itinerancy. These had been mooted for over a decade and found some echoes in an increasing refusal by some justices to license both preachers and places of worship. Not only did Sidmouth's Bill fail in its objectives, but in the process it created a more aggressive dissent.

Lovegrove concludes his monograph with three appendices of particular interest to Baptists. The first transcribes the Journal of Thomas Wastfield, schoolmaster of Imber, who worked a circuit itinerancy in the Upper Avon Valley and the Vale of Pewsey in Wiltshire sponsored by the Baptist Missionary Society. The second is a comprehensive list of Itinerant Societies, whilst the third contains baptismal statistics for the Midland, Northamptonshire and Western Associations of Baptist churches for the period 1770-1830.

This volume deserves a wide readership both for its thoroughness in research and its skill of interpretation in assessing this most critical generation in the development of modern dissent.

COVENTRY ARCHIVES

The Society notes with interest that the extensive archives of the Queen's Road Church in Coventry have been deposited with the City of Coventry Record Office and is most grateful to the city authorities for the attention that has been given to the cataloguing of almost 19 linear feet of materials relating to the church, its agencies and associated churches. This has involved some three months of a professional archivist's attention and the records are now in a climate-controlled muniment room securing their existence for the attention of future generations of scholars. We hope this example will encourage other churches to put their records on deposit in a similar way which we believe is one of the best ways of ensuring their survival.