

Review Article - *Essays in Honour of Alan Ruston*

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In this tribute to Alan Ruston eight distinguished contributors cover a wide range of topics, chronologically from the eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth century with the core on the nineteenth century. Most focus on individuals but in the process shed a varied light on Unitarian history. G.M. Ditchfield begins with a case study of William Tayleur of Shrewsbury as an example of lay leadership. His opening remarks stress the importance of lay people in a great variety of religious and political circumstances, particularly when these are hostile as in France in the 1790s and more recently in the Soviet Union, and one might add present day China. In retrospect Unitarians faced little repression despite being beyond the law until 1813, but that generalisation breaks down when examined in detail. In the late 1780s and 1790s just when Unitarians began to organise themselves they were threatened by popular disapproval sanctioned by eminent churchmen and politicians. Tayleur, living not too far from Birmingham, felt the ripples from the Birmingham riots. But he was not one to hide his beliefs. Unlike some (Samuel Pipe-Wolferstan comes to mind) who conformed at home, but attended Essex Street while in the metropolis, he followed his conscience; he left the Church of England and worshipped at the Dissenting meeting House, High Street Chapel, in Shrewsbury. Despite a broadly liberal religious outlook (he was a regular subscriber to the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge), when it came to his own theological views he did not compromise. In 1791 when the Unitarian Society was formed he supported a narrow definition of Unitarianism which excluded Arianism (although Richard Price joined). He was firmly opposed to the Arian belief in the pre-existence of Christ. Yet although he agreed with Joseph Priestley and Theophilus Lindsey in most things, he disagreed with their belief in the salvation of all souls, including those of the wicked. He thought that the idea that the wicked would eventually enjoy eternal happiness was unscriptural and seemed to favour the annihilation of the wicked at the final end of things. Tayleur was a gift to the Unitarians as he was highly educated, independent minded and with a considerable income, who used his surplus profits for religious and philanthropic purposes. He gave substantially more than any other layman towards the building of the renewed Chapel in Essex Street, although he never attended the chapel. If we do not know how Unitarianism would have developed without Tayleur's support, one can be sure that

he contributed significantly to the growing confidence of the Unitarians in the later eighteenth century and their resilience in the 1790s. In particular he was profoundly supportive of Theophilus Lindsey, who played such a key role in the development of Unitarianism, and similarly of Joseph Priestley, including his scientific work. He even welcomed Priestley's provocative *The Importance and Extent of Free Inquiry in Matters of Religion* (1785), in which he described rational Dissenters as 'laying gunpowder, grain by grain under the old building of error and superstition', namely the Church of England. Yet he himself preferred to keep out of the limelight. As Ditchfield notes, his generosity was 'unobtrusive'. In many ways he set a pattern for nineteenth-century Unitarian philanthropists.

Leonard Smith writes on the contribution of British Naval Officers to the advancement of nineteenth century Unitarianism. As the title suggests the focus is upon Unitarianism and therefore on the work of Unitarian sailors on land. But the article is important for it opens up the unexplored subject of the service of Unitarians in the forces in the nineteenth century.¹ Smith has created biographical accounts of five sailors who were or became Unitarians while serving. The most significant of these was Captain Edward Rotheram, RN, CB (1753-1830). He came from a distinguished Dissenting background; his grandfather was Rev. Caleb Rotheram minister at Kendal, where he kept his own academy. Edward undoubtedly had a different view of life and of hierarchy than his fellow officers. This, combined with a hot temper, made him a difficult colleague. He was not, however, an enemy of hierarchy for he felt that he should have had greater recognition for his career in the navy. But he had a greater interest in the crew of his lower decks than most officers. His courage was not in doubt for, like Nelson, he made himself highly visible at Trafalgar, in his case by wearing a large cocked hat. He survived, although 47 of his crew were killed and many more were injured. In the aftermath Rotheram was given the command of a 74 gun ship of the line whose captain had been killed in the battle. This was the *Bellerophon*, known to sailors as Billy Ruffian. His first task was to escort the *Victory* carrying Nelson's body home. Ten years later, after Waterloo, Napoleon, realising that he couldn't escape to America, surrendered himself to *Bellerophon's* captain, but that was no longer Rotheram. The ship's officers disliked the way he censored

¹ An exception is Michael Glover, ed., *A Gentleman Volunteer: the Letters of George Hennell from the Peninsular War, 1812-1813* (London: Heineman, 1979). He was one of a mini dynasty of Unitarians. He joined the forces as a private in the hope of gaining promotion through active service rather than purchase and is one of the few officers who talks about reading the bible whilst on campaign. I am indebted to Dr. Catriona Kennedy for this information.

them in front of the crew. They complained about his lack of respect towards them and to the ship's chaplain (ships of 64 or more guns were required to have an Anglican chaplain) and this led to a court martial in April 1807. He was found guilty of unofficerlike behaviour but not of oppressive conduct, but it spelt the end of his career. The following year he left active service. Rotheram was undoubtedly a difficult person to get along with, but he had an enquiring mind and has left a terrific legacy for naval historians. Ship's captains kept logs but they are not especially informative about their crews. Not so for Rotheram. His log of the crew was incredibly detailed. He may have put it together because he was bored, a possibility suggested by Smith, but what one does when one is bored is also a reflection of personality. His log suggests an enlightened concern for empirical information and a humanitarian interest in ordinary folk (the officers were not included in his survey). The result is a unique record of 387 seamen including their background, age, physique and skills.² Rotheram kept a commonplace book which is testimony to his inner piety and Unitarian religiosity. However, unlike the other four sailors Smith deals with, he did not contribute to Unitarianism in a public way. An obvious question is how the sailors reconciled their Unitarianism with war and service to the state. None had conscientious scruples while in service, but for Captain Thomas Thrush RN (1761-1843), it became a serious issue in his retirement. Coming to the conclusion that war was unchristian and unlawful he resolved to resign his commission and in doing so forfeit his half pay. He communicated his resolution to his wife by letter on his sixtieth birthday indicating that if he was still of the same mind in three years time he would resign. With only six months to go, his wife indicated her agreement with his decision also by letter. One wonders what he would have done had she not given her approval. Thrush published his reasons for his resignation and was an active advocate of peace for the rest of his life. Conscience undoubtedly trumped self-interest. Of the remaining three sailors discussed by Smith, Rear-Admiral James Gifford, RN (1768-1853) followed his father's Unitarian views – he had been converted by the writings of John Jebb. Having served in the navy from 1783 to 1812, he spent the rest of his long life championing the Unitarian cause, notably in Wales and the Channel Islands where he retired. Captain George Lewis Brown, RN (1784-1856) had the distinction of serving on the *Victory* at Trafalgar. His active service was relatively short lived, from 1797 until 1810. After a short period as a farmer he enrolled at the Inner Temple and was called to the bar in 1821 and practised in Exeter, retiring to Bridgewater in 1836. He was an eminent civic figure in the West

² For a detailed discussion of the value of Rotheram's information see David Cordingley, *Billy Ruffian, The Bellerophon and the Downfall of Napoleon. The Biography of a Ship of the Line, 1782-1836* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), pp.208-12.

Country and a stalwart of the Unitarian congregation at Bridgewater. Commander George Eyre Powell, RN (1790-1855) followed a similar career path. He enrolled in 1806 and his active service stretched just beyond the peace of 1815, when he was appointed first lieutenant of the *Victory* which had been consigned to the role of guard ship at Portsmouth. In 1826 he settled at Colyton, was active in local affairs and from 1831 was treasurer of George's Meeting there. One hopes that Smith's pioneering article will inspire others to investigate the role of Unitarians who served the state in the armed forces.

Timothy Whelan examines Crabb Robinson's quest for a 'rational faith' in the period 1817-1837. He tried to reconcile irreconcilables, free will and determinism, scripture and rationality, heart and head, questions which Crabb Robinson had wrestled with early in his life (1790-1805) without coming to set conclusions. They came back to trouble him some fifteen years later. In the interim he had pursued a legal career and his intellectual interests and contacts were predominantly literary. It was his friendship with Wilhem Benecke (1776-1837), a German manufacturer living in London, which brought intransigent questions concerning spirituality back to the fore. Benecke's passion was religious and philosophical. His mysticism attracted Crabb Robinson but also worried him. When Benecke published his only book on the epistle of Paul to the Romans in 1831 it took Crabb Robinson a while to receive a copy and respond. When he did he provided a brief account of his own religious history. He lamented the lack of regular instruction in his youth and his initial reliance on orthodox notions. When confronted by scepticism he lacked counter arguments and he 'sprang at once from one extreme to another.... from believing everything I believed in nothing' (p.59). He was saved from this state by his German studies which 'inclined me to a favourable study of religious doctrine'. But if he was saved from going from one extreme to another he was not saved from his tendency to vacillate. As he confessed to Benecke, 'my mind is very unsettled on the great points of religion' (p.59). Whelan investigates Crabb Robinson's worries in careful detail and shows that he never reached a satisfactory conclusion. It was, he suggests, German pietism and mysticism first encountered by Crabb Robinson in 1801 and, in the later period, most notably expressed by Benecke, which continued to unsettle his rational faith 'well into the 1840s' (p.72).

David Wykes' s article brings us down to more mundane but no less important matters. His is a rather dispiriting account of education for the Unitarian ministry in the early nineteenth century. This is no reflection on the author but on his detailed demonstration that the Unitarians

failed to create academies capable of meeting the demand for ministers and notably failed to provide adequate support for poor candidates and for poor congregations. This conclusion is supported by the scrupulous examination of the records relating to the academies for which, appropriately, Alan Ruston's index to obituaries on Unitarian ministers is an essential resource. One of Wykes's important findings is that the role of the Warrington Academy and New College, Manchester, is shown to be less significant than Daventry and Northampton. When Thomas Belsham left Daventry Academy in 1789 because he had become a convinced Unitarian he brought in his wake many of his students, possibly as many as thirty four, who had become Unitarians as a result of his teaching. This was just as well for in 1798 the Coward Trustees closed Horsey's academy in Northampton and excluded liberal dissenters from its successor at Wymondley. This deprived heterodox students of significant funding and left Manchester College as their only academy. Although it might appear that Unitarians could have husbanded their resources more effectively in this period, Wykes explains in relation to Manchester College, that apart from several very wealthy families and a larger group of wealthy Unitarians, most Unitarians lacked the disposable income to make a really significant contribution to its funds. While the better off congregations were less affected than the poorer ones, they were still short of ministers. In 1826 Rev. John Fullagar of Chichester proposed the establishment of a fund for poorer students but without success. As a result they had to rely on ad hoc acts of generosity from wealthy Unitarians. The character of nineteenth century Unitarianism was shaped by its failures, in particular it became a religion of the high minded middle classes with only a limited evangelical appeal to the less well-educated. However, as several of these papers demonstrate, there were always exceptions to this rule, notably enthusiastic lay persons like Edward Hammond who self-educated their way into the ministry.

Daniel Costley's article on Edward Hammond (181-1867) is a remarkable example of historical recovery and an ideal paper for Alan Ruston's festschrift. Hammond died of typhus at the relatively young age of 49 and few of his numerous progeny lived out their three score years and ten. Yet he packed an amazing amount into his life. With little formal schooling he worked at his education and impressed those around him enough to attend gratuitously theological courses at New Manchester College (then at Gordon Square, London). He began his adult life as a travelling milliner. He appears to have scraped enough of a living to maintain his large family (he had nine children), but they never had enough money to live comfortably and always lived in cramped accommodation. In 1861 his business was failing yet Edward still found time to further his religious education. For him Unitarianism was not a halfway house

to infidelity. Initially he worshipped at South Place Ethical Society, but increasingly sought a markedly Christian form of Unitarianism amongst the General Baptists. He was baptized in 1863. By this time he was preaching to General Baptist congregations, although it appears that most did not follow his example of adult baptism. The inscription in his headstone for Edward and his wife – they died within weeks of each other – indicates his final theological location: ‘There is one God, and one mediator between God and Man, the man Christ Jesus. Tim. 12c. 5v.’ With the sudden death of their parents their eight surviving children were indigent. An orphan fund was set up for them, which, starting modestly it eventually reached nearly a quarter of a million pounds in today’s prices. It ensured that the children were looked after and was a testimony to their father’s standing amongst Unitarians.

Ann Peart’s article on William Gaskell’s place in Unitarian history sheds light on Mrs Gaskell’s husband. Although there has been a tendency to look upon him as subordinate to his famous wife, in his own time he was regarded as an eminent figure. Unlike several of those studied in this festchrift he had a firm and relatively undisturbed faith, which harked back to the influence of Joseph Priestley. This in part explains why he has been ignored by historians of Unitarianism. He wasn’t an original thinker and he did not push the bounds of Unitarianism. Although he defended it from orthodox critics within the denomination, he was a stabilising personality, willing to engage with those who disagreed with him, notably from the Martineau camp, but placing conscientious enquiry above specific doctrine. Yet his contribution to Unitarian thought would have been more appreciated if his anonymous writings and sermons for special occasions had been brought together. But Gaskell never sought the limelight and turned down the invitation to minister at Essex Street, London. Yet he was remarkably influential within the movement. In contrast with the situation earlier in the century analysed by David Wykes, Unitarian education was now well organised with instruction available at Manchester New College and at the Unitarian Home Missionary Board. Gaskell played a major role in both through his teaching and administration, particularly as a tutor and then Principal of the latter, where Peart estimates he influenced over eighty students. With her study his highly significant role in nineteenth century Unitarianism will no longer be ignored and his high standing amongst Unitarians will be recognised alongside his immensely distinguished civic role which, as she noted at the beginning of her article, is still remembered and celebrated in Manchester.

David Steers' article on the Rev. John Orr (1826-1898) of Comber, County Down and Cambridge, Massachusetts is in accord with the strong theme of these articles, namely the drawing attention to neglected or hardly known Unitarians. Steers sets Orr's achievements in philosophy and theology in the context of troubles within the movement, most notably between the Synod of Ulster and the Remonstrant or Non Subscribing Synod which was expelled from the Synod of Ulster in 1830. In 1838 Orr's father moved from the congregation of Anaghlaone, which had been founded by the Synod of Ulster, to the Remonstrant congregation at Ballyhelmlin, and remained as their minister until his death in 1869. His second son, John Orr, was educated at the Belfast Academical Institute. After training for the ministry amongst Remonstrant clergy, he held a short lived ministry at Strabane before he was installed minister of the Remonstrant congregation at Comber. Both he and the congregation prospered. Orr's ministry lasted twenty nine years, ending only with his resignation in 1879 and emigration to the United States. There, he seems to have fallen under something of a cloud and although well qualified to take on an American ministry, he abandoned the idea and sank into obscurity; his death in 1896 went unnoticed. Yet as Steers demonstrate, he should be remembered not least for his two major publications, *Theism: a Treatise on God, Providence and Immortality* (1857) and *Unitarianism in the Present Time. Its Important Principles, Its tendencies and its Prospects* (1863). In the former he reviews arguments for the existence of God and brings them up to date with arguments drawn from his appreciation of science. His belief in the 'progressiveness of creation' (p.127) differed from earlier notions of progress as it acknowledged the long history of the world. In the latter, Orr demonstrates his broad knowledge of contemporary trends in Unitarianism in Europe and America. Unlike any other work coming out of Ireland at the time, he makes the case for Unitarianism being 'a progressive theology... and a free theology acknowledging no standard of orthodoxy, and trusting to inquiry for the advancement of truth (p.130).' It was hard for a minister of such liberal views to have to cope with fierce dissensions amongst the Remonstrants. Their leader, Henry Montgomery had been a defender of the rights of individual conscience, but became increasingly worried about the trend away from Scriptural Unitarianism towards the Universalist Unitarianism of Theodore Parker. The result was the introduction of three theological questions for candidates for the ministry. Although Orr was the moderator at the synod which approved the questions, most of those who protested against them came from Orr's Presbytery of Bangor. In the factional conflict which followed Orr did not survive unscathed. Although a moderating influence, he was regarded as a sympathiser with the radical protesters. When Montgomery died in 1865 he was appointed his successor as Professor of Church History, Pastoral Theology and Moral Philosophy to the Non- Subscribing

Association. His appointment was fiercely though unsuccessfully contested. Orr, notwithstanding, continued to develop and publicise his broadly liberal views, encapsulated in his final published work, a sermon preached at Downpatrick in 1877 in which he made the case for co-operation amongst Irish Unitarians. 'A Church founded on freedom', he suggested, '...should be characterized by largeness and wide sympathies' (p.137). In the Irish context that has an admonitory flavour. Orr at least had the satisfaction of having the support of an appreciative congregation but the, at times, brutal factionalism within the movement must have taken its toll. For him the lapse into obscurity, following his emigration to the United States, must have had its compensations.

Contention is also the theme of the last article by Andrew Hill. He investigates a somewhat neglected legal case which in many respects was a sequel to the Lady Hewley case. That case raised the issue as to whether Unitarians were in rightful possession of chapels established before their congregations became Unitarian and at a time when Unitarianism was illegal. One consequence of the Lords' ruling of 1842 against the Unitarians, was that St. Saviourgate York, which had been supported by Lady Hewley's charitable trust, lost income and its trustees. Subsequently, the Dissenters' Chapels Act of 1844 stabilised the situation for Unitarians by granting them possession of those chapels, like St. Saviourgate, where they had formed the congregation for twenty five years or more. Towards the end of the century St. Saviourgate once more became involved in litigation which this time arose out of growing worries that Unitarianism was being infiltrated by agnostics and atheists. As in the Lady Hewley case, what was at root a theological dispute, ended up in the courts. The case would have amused Charles Dickens although it was resolved rather more quickly than Jarndyce and Jarndyce in *Bleak House*. Woven into the dispute, as Hill shows with forensic skill, were clashes of personality. Indeed the initial cause was dissatisfaction with the ministry of Frederick Sydney Morris (1846-93). Though not quite demonstrating the fierce factionalism of the Irish Remonstrants, the issues were clouded by personal animosities at odds with professed Unitarian values. On Christmas Eve 1895, at a stormy meeting of the congregation, it was reported that 'there was some smashing of glass and furniture' (p.151). If the plaintiffs had not been so intransigent they should have been able to see what was obvious to Mr. Justice Kekewich in his judgement on the case in December 1899. He noted that the plaintiffs complaint that the pulpit had been used to preach 'strictly agnostic doctrines' (p.161) was true, but no longer relevant for the present minister of St. Saviourgate, Henry Rawlings, 'was quite acceptable to the plaintiffs so that there was "nothing now to complain about"' (p.161). He also

found that the evidence against the committee and the trustees was not compelling and awarded cost to the defendants. His summing up acted as a reminder to other disputatious congregations that they should not resort to law before exhausting every avenue for resolving disputes, and if they did resort to law they should present the court with sufficient evidence. In fact the issue at stake, the relationship of those who explored the very periphery of religious belief with more convinced Unitarians was not solved by the case, but no further attempts were made to resolve it by going to law.

This tribute closes with a bibliography of Alan Ruston's works from 1967 to the present day. It is 28 pages long and is a record of outstanding service to Dissenting history. It is therefore especially appropriate that, as in his work, the papers in this tribute, open up new perspectives on that history.

Martin Fitzpatrick