F. C. Massingberd: Historian in a Lincolnshire Parish

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In the first half of the nineteenth century questions about the "scientific" nature of history were hardly being asked in England. History was considered a part of the national literature, written by persons who were involved in the performance of political, social, and ecclesiastical duties. The ablest English works in history, in W. R. W. Stephens' words, "proceeded from University men indeed, but not, as a rule from those who were resident, but from the Cabinet Minister, the banker, or the country clergyman."

Francis Charles Massingberd, rector of Ormsby-cum-Ketsby in Lincolnshire, was one of those "amateurs"—a rural clergyman who carried on his research and prepared his manuscript while performing his parochial duties. In 1842 his history of the English Reformation was published. The book revealed Massingberd to be an historian of only average ability; through the writing of history he had conveyed his anxieties for the Church of England's present difficulties as much as any dispassionate interpretation of her past. But regardless of the deficiency of the finished product, Massingberd's endeavours as an historian are worthy of consideration. Here are present some of the personal motives and parochial difficulties, as well as an indication of the wider historical context, which had bearing upon the writing of ecclesiastical history just prior to Stubbs, Maitland, and Gardiner.

F. C. Massingberd's family history at Ormsby can be traced back to the early years of the seventeenth century. His childhood was spent in the rectory of Washingborough near Lincoln, accustoming him to the quiet, uneventful life of rural Lincolnshire. But even the wolds resounded with the alarming news which ran throughout conservative England in the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century; both church and state were in danger of total collapse because of the imminent measures of constitutional reform. An aged don at Oxford proposed the daily after-dinner toast, "Church and King, let us drink them while we can! ! !" When York Cathedral was badly damaged by fire in 1829, the word came to Massingberd from a friend at Magdalen College, Oxford, that "the burning of York Minster is only typical of the universal burning of the Protestant Church."
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As Massingberd, in 1831, began working on a pamphlet on church reform, his close friend, Edward Churton, was staunchly pessimistic and could only hope that the Church of England would survive until the manuscript was ready for press. Churton could feel the foundations of government being shaken; anarchy hovered over the whole society.

There is no vantage-ground left. The King (God bless him!) is a simpleton, and has no depth of views beyond a little temporary popularity. The ministers are men of talents, (bons esprits) but without experience in public affairs, the majority of them needy and desperate. Where is the Champion to be found? Churton especially feared those men who were inclined “to try experiments with all the institutions whose permanency is most precious”, and the Church of England headed his list of most-precious institutions.

Massingberd was in full agreement. When he wrote Some Considerations on Church Reform, and on the Principles of Church Legislation in 1833, he admitted that the Reformation of the sixteenth century was incomplete, but insisted that the Reformed Church of England was not faulty. The present anomalies stemmed from that incompleteness rather than from “any radical faultiness in those parts that are accomplished.” Resisting all demands for revision of the Prayer Book or the constitutional structure of the church, Massingberd urged would-be reformers to “seek rather to restore and complete the institutions of our Reformers, than to amend them.”

This conservative ideal would, within a decade, be a large factor in his writing of a history of the English Reformation.

But another element would be just as prominent; Anglican anxieties over the relationship of the church to the state were never far removed from their fears and suspicions of the Roman Catholic Church. Since the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, an immobilizing dread had set in. One of Massingberd’s acquaintances reasoned:

If the Church should fall, i.e. if its connection with the state shall ever be altogether dissolved, will not the Roman Catholics be most likely to take that place which we high church people suppose will of course be still less in us on our own church footing of independency. They will have an organization ready. We shall have one to make.

The clash which ensued, however, had little to do with ecclesiastical organization. From 1833 to 1841 ninety tracts of an explicitly “High Church” character were printed and distributed from Oxford. Significantly, the Oxford divines began writing their pamphlets against what they perceived to be the state’s encroachment upon the church’s authority; and equally important, the tracts became increasingly Catholic in tone, reaching their extreme in John Henry Newman’s Tract 90.

At the outset of the Oxford Movement, F. C. Massingberd was sympathetic. In 1833, he—like most high churchmen—agreed with the primary purposes of the Tractarians; he communicated with Keble and Pusey, and nodded agreement with Churton’s estimate of Keble as “a true-hearted fellow, worth gold.” Only as the Romeward trend in the Movement became more apparent did Massingberd withdraw his support. The break was complete by 1840-2, when The English Reformation was being written; but—as was the case with practically all ecclesiastical history written in the middle half of the nineteenth century—Massingberd’s work could not be free of the Tractarian shadow. His history of the English Reformation was visibly coloured, both in positive sympathy and in negative reaction, by the controversy which would not let even little Ormsby lie in peace.

Yet the Englishman’s Library Series, of which Massingberd’s history was a part, was begun with conservative motives similar to the original purposes of the Tractarians. As is indicated in the correspondence between the co-editors, Edward Churton and William Gresley, the chief object of the series was “to counteract Infidel and Low Churchmen publications”
through works of history, biography, and fiction.\textsuperscript{10} The volumes would be small and inexpensive in order to reach the middle classes “where real knowledge and sound principles are so much wanted.” The contributors to the series, in Churton’s opinion, should not be associated with any school or party, and the style of writing should be popular.\textsuperscript{11} The latter requirement, especially, created difficulty for the editors. Churton knew very few men who could write popularly; though “sumply furnished with the essentials of principle and scholarship,” most of his friends would be hesitant to “stoop to write virginitas puerosque, or dauble with the kildings of the flock.” Furthermore, most of the more capable clergy were “too busy with parochial engagements to write books.”\textsuperscript{12}

Churton and Gresley corresponded often, suggesting authors for the series. In May, 1839, Churton recommended Massingberd as a friend and capable scholar who would, out of consideration for their friendship, write a volume of history. Churton feared, however, that Massingberd was too busy to be bothered.\textsuperscript{13} Massingberd was indeed busy, but bored. Early in 1839, while chained to his daily round of parish visitation, prayer, and sermon-preparation, he read about William Wilberforce’s work in the abolition of the slave trade and wrote the following wistful words in his diary: “Oh for some engrossing occupation! Alas, what a wish for a Priest who has two Churches and near 400 souls lying six miles scattered! !”\textsuperscript{14} With the mixed motivation of intellectual curiosity and the need for relief from boredom, Massingberd began reading Collier’s \textit{Ecclesiastical History} in April, 1839. His studying “with a view to the constitution of the Church of England”\textsuperscript{15} appears, in retrospect, to have been a premonition: within a month a letter from Churton arrived, requesting Massingberd to “undertake some portion of English Church History” for the Englishman’s Library Series.\textsuperscript{16} Pleased with the idea, Massingberd noted in his diary that working on church history would be “much more agreeable than managing farmers.”\textsuperscript{17}

The editors originally thought that it would be best for Massingberd to write a history of the English Church from Elizabeth’s accession to the Rebellion. They asked Charles LeBas to write a history of the English Reformation; but Rivingtons, who were publishing LeBas’ other historical works,\textsuperscript{18} advised him to refuse the offer. Massingberd thus became the “recruit for the Reformation.”\textsuperscript{19} In August, 1839, the premature announcement was made that \textit{The English Reformation} would soon be published, but the author noted in his journal that the work was not yet begun, and was “hardly thought of, nor assented to.”\textsuperscript{20} His journal for September 20 received the confession:

My habits of indolence, procrastination, and dawdling are beyond conception. It is a fortnight ago that I got up at 6 on a Monday and began to put my books to right, in preparation for ‘History of the Reformation’ — Never having since arisen at that hour, the books remain in still worse confusion.\textsuperscript{21}

Churton wrote to Massingberd in February, 1840, inquiring about the progress of the history.\textsuperscript{22} The original plan had been to start the series with Churton’s history of the Saxon and British Church, to be followed immediately by the volume on the English Reformation.\textsuperscript{23} His own manuscript being almost ready for the publisher, Churton now hoped that Massingberd had “made a good stride” since they had last corresponded.\textsuperscript{24} The month of March was the date agreed upon for the \textit{English Reformation} to be completed, so Massingberd quickened the tempo of his work, “leaving letters and business undone.”\textsuperscript{25} Four days of the week were spent in seclusion, reading and writing; only Friday, Saturday and Sunday were given to the duties of the parish.\textsuperscript{26} With the increased literary activity, the pastoral responsibilities suffered:

Old sermon today. School neglected. Very indolent and therefore, perhaps, very much depressed in spirits all the latter part of the week. Seem to have such a load of business weighing down upon me that the thought of it jars my mind and seems even to prevent me from doing anything.\textsuperscript{27}
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As it soon became evident that the manuscript could not be completed by March, Massingberd reprimanded himself for having "too many parties, and too much company all last year." He was overcome by the necessity of finishing the history, and determined to have "no dinner visits beyond immediate neighbourhood, at least for the present." But though the duties of the parish were neglected, social engagements curtailed, and personal desires sacrificed, the English Reformation was not merely a burden. The book, like a babe, struggled to be born; and the author, mother like, had only pride for this greatest burden and greatest joy. In April, 1840, he noted in his diary that his past Sunday's sermon was bad, "part old, part extemp[oraneous]." Divine guidance would be sought, through prayer, to determine if some commitments should be dropped. But for the work on the history, only "help and guidance and a blessing" would be sought.

Massingberd was not physically strong. In December, 1840, Churton noted that the work on the history was a job which was too heavy for the author. On New Year's Day, 1841, Massingberd was still "busy at Reformation History", with the end in sight; but in March he became violently ill, showed symptoms of consumption, and was advised by his doctor to convalesce in the Mediterranean area. The manuscript, on the verge of completion, had to be left with Churton, who edited, corrected, and added material where it was needed.

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Churton, rector of Crayke in northern Yorkshire, welcomed the opportunity. Crayke was as remote as Ormsby, and although Churton had kept up his literary activities—serious study and writing, as well as prolific correspondence—he begrudged the difficulties involved in helping to shape the events of the times from his isolated post in Yorkshire. As he later wrote to W. E. Gladstone,

I have now for twenty years lived almost entirely on a country-living, making only a few short visits to London; and here in the N. Riding of Yorkshire one is perhaps as much as possible removed from those opportunities of remarking the progress of society and opinion in more stirring scenes, which are so necessary to aid to a correct judgment of the signs of the times. So that while Mr. Gladstone can do something to keep Chevalier Bursen in order in matters of religious policy regarding the present, I can only empty myself to his critical misdemeanors respecting the past.

He became co-editor of the Englishman's Library Series in order to combine his interest in the Church of England's history with his concern for her more immediate needs. Whereas the series was originally begun in 1839 to oppose the Dissenters, Evangelicals, and liberals, by 1841-2 Churton saw Romanism to be an even more serious threat. He could still affirm the benefits of the Oxford Movement, but was in full agreement with Massingberd and numerous other high churchmen of the older school in seeing the Movement's dangers for the Church of England. It was now necessary, he wrote to J. C. Crosthwaite in 1842, "to use the drag-chain" to slow down the Tractarians' onrush toward Popery. By recalling the Church of England's past and thereby defining her present character, the Englishman's Library Series would hold to Anglican catholicity and avoid looking "without circumspection or with any mistaken identity toward Rome."

Churton was relatively well-equipped for the task of completing Massingberd's history of the English Reformation. In his own volume, The Early English Church, published in 1840, he showed some degree of critical judgment toward historians such as Fuller and Foxe, as well as lucidity in the development of narrative. In correspondence with Gresley he indicated pertinent points of discontent with Robertson, Hume, Mosheim, Southey, Collier, and Soames. Knowing the value of research into primary sources, he believed that Strype's and Burnet's "depositories of Records" were indispensable, though their commentaries were never to be taken uncritically.
The sixteenth century, to Churton, was a time of "thrilling interest." His estimate of the English Reformation was predictably of the old high-church variety, and his formula was identical with Massingberd's: the Anglican Reformers steered the via media between Papal and Puritan extremes by giving due attention both to the Fathers and to the Scriptures. Churton looked at the sixteenth century through his high-church spectacles and saw his own reflection there, even if his vision demanded the assistance of imaginative conjecture:

It is plain enough from many public documents of the period of the Reformation, that Cranmer was not always of one mind about the Scripturial authority for a Three-fold Ministry, as the Articles of 1536 contradict the Ordinal; but we must judge his last acts to represent his true opinions; and if there had then appeared that danger to Episcopacy, which arose in the next age, no doubt the Apostolical Succession would have been more decidedly put forward.

Not only did Churton agree fully with Massingberd on the nature of the Reformation, and the present danger of Popery; they were of one accord in stalwart resistance to church reform at the hands of the state. Both men supported the 'Tractarians' denunciation of a Whig Parliament's action against the church, and, faced with the reform-conscious Ecclesiastical Commission, they registered their discontent through their histories. In his Early English Church, Churton depicted the co-existent power of Papal and Erastian domination in medieval England, built on a kind of truce between Pope and King. The temptation to make a strained application could not be resisted: "There can be no revival of popery in England, while the Church is free." Massingberd, towards the end of his English Reformation, made a less subtle assault on would-be reformers. Suggesting that the Prayer Book was in some respects better than Cranmer, Latimer, Ridley, and Hooker left it, being "but in completion of what they designed", he was quick to add that Englishmen should seek "to maintain it as it is" by resisting Whiggish attempts to alter the Prayer Book beyond recognition.

As moderate as its dull blue cover, The English Reformation was a fitting product of two Tory Churchmen of the old school. It clearly fulfilled the purpose of the series of which it was a part: "to keep clear of all Ultraism and ulterior tendencies, making the Prayer Book our standard, and not any 'poetical' beau ideal of Catholicity." A dominant characteristic of the book is pride in the grand old Church of England, which "almost alone" of all the churches of western Christendom retained the primitive discipline and forms of the Catholic Church while at the same time being faithful to the Scriptures. Although imperfect, the Anglican Church was "yet a beacon to the nations, of apostolical authority on the one hand, and of scripture truth on the other."

One would hardly expect Massingberd to be so favourable toward the German and Swiss Reformers. He was not, however, as insularly critical of the Continental Reformers as were many of his contemporaries. Luther, he admitted, did the one thing needed at the time; Martin Bucer, Peter Martyr, and other foreign Reformers made significant contributions to English religion. But in the final analysis, Massingberd could not escape the self-esteem of his own generation: he looked with condescension toward the Continentals who "shared the struggle of the Reformation, but with less patience in the conflict, and less happy results."

Churton was convinced that The English Reformation was "not an un scholar-like performance," and regretted that he had to alter and omit some of the manuscript without consulting the author. In a long letter of explanation to Massingberd's sister, he claimed that he had "carefully endeavoured to be true to his [the author's] sense, and spared no pains in getting it through the press in such a form as I hope will not discredit him." Massingberd, however, was not pleased. In Italy when a copy of the book arrived, he became so enraged with the alterations that he cursed. Contrition and self-purgation inevitably followed, and
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Massingberd finally closed a chapter on his labours as an historian by noting in his diary that he could no longer be vexed about the book, because of "the great good which the writing of it has done me."35

One has cause to question, however, if the book did much general good. Admittedly, enough copies were sold: The English Reformation had gone through four editions by 1866. But one is hard pressed to find a single reference to Massingberd's work in any of the numerous letters, diaries, or biographies of the period. The book was bought as part of a large set of works in fiction and biography, as well as history. One suspects that many members of the middle class, to whom the volumes were directed, found in this multi-volume, elegant blue-black set another symbol of their rise to social and intellectual eminence. The Englishman's Library Series undoubtedly adorned the shelves in middle-class homes as it now fills a shelf in the Cambridge University Library, impressive in number and appearance, but slightly dusty from disuse. A closer inspection of the Cambridge volumes bears out, symbolically, one's suspicions: many of the pages are yet un-cut.

In 1842 there were several Anglican ecclesiastical journals in existence, and each one had a section for book reviews. But Massingberd's English Reformation was scarcely mentioned. One reviewer, for The Christian Remembrancer, merely gave a brief and unenthusiastic note of recognition to the "impartial and well-considered views" of the author.34 The British Critic took Massingberd more seriously, if less favourably. The reviewer hastily praised the author's literary ability and admissions in favour of medieval religion,36 and then launched into virulent criticism: Massingberd had not considered his subject as a member of the Catholic Church, had accepted without question the Protestant accusation of Rome as the erring party in the Church's broken unity,37 and had—by viewing his subject through "a very Anglican medium"—given little emphasis to the One, Visible, Apostolic Church. Worst of all, in the opinion of the reviewer, Massingberd had attempted to show that religion in England was better since, than before, the Reformation.38

By 1842 The British Critic was dominated by the extremists within the Tractarian party. This polemical review gave substance to Massingberd's contention that the issue between the Church of England and her opponents was "in great measure, an historical question."39 Simply stated, the question was: "What is the Church of England?" What was her relationship to the ancient church? Did she, in the sixteenth century, relinquish her claim to catholickity? Would she stand or fall? Massingberd's efforts as an historian were complementary to his work as a parish priest. He attempted, by the use of history, to define and thereby to defend the institutional values to which he was committed. The printed page became his pulpit and he wrote, as he preached, to communicate. Historical fact, literary merit, and religious truth were seen to be integrally related. Perhaps his finished product was doomed to fail, but Massingberd's attempt was common to his times'
Notes


6 F. C. Massingberd, Some Considerations on Church Reform, and on the Principles of Church Legislation (1833), p. 16; see p. 56.

7 Ibid., "Advertisement," pp. vii-viii; on the "reform mania" of the times, see W. L. Matheson, English Church Reform, 1815-1839 (1925), pp. 16-100; S. C. Carpenter, Church and People, 1789-1839 (1933), pp. 49-67.

8 Mass. MSS, 1/84. Letter from "J. P." to F. C. Massingberd, 8 February, 1830.

9 See Mass. MSS, 1/110. Churton to Massingberd, 12 April, 1831.

10 Pusey Papers, Pusey House, Oxford. Letter (copy) from Edward Churton to William Gresley, n.d. (1840). On 1 July, 1839, Churton wrote to Gresley, "In undertaking the Englishman's Library, my wish was principally to counteract the Religious Tract Society, and the Dissenting Easy Reading Societies of all kinds."

11 Pusey Papers, Churton to Gresley, 25 January, 1839.

12 Ibid., 5 March, 1839.

13 Ibid., 8 May, 1839.


15 Ibid., 6 April, 1839.


17 Mass. MSS, 8/1. Journal, 4 May, 1839.

18 C. W. LeBas, The Life of William (1832); The Life of Archbishop Cranmer, 2 vols. (1833); The Life of Bishop Jewel (1835); The Life of Archbishop Laud (1836).

19 Pusey Papers. Churton to Gresley, 22 June, 1839.


21 Ibid., 20 September, 1839.

22 Ibid., 7 February, 1840.

23 Pusey Papers. Churton to Gresley, 22 June, 1839.

24 Ibid., 16 March, 1840.

25 Pusey Papers. Churton to Gresley, 22 June, 1840.


27 Mass. MSS, 8/2. Journal, 1 April, 1840.


29 Ibid., 17 April, 1840.

30 Ibid., 12 April, 1840.

31 Pusey Papers. Churton to Gresley, 5 December, 1840.

32 Mass. MSS, 8/1. Journal, 1 January, 2 March, and 5 April, 1841.


34 Gladstone Papers, British Museum, Add. MSS 44370/307. Letter from Edward, Churton to W. E. Gladstone, 19 September, 1851. Bunyan was the Prussian minister in London.

35 Correspondence of J. C. Crosthwaite, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. misc. e. 117, f. 136. Letter from Edward Churton to J. C. Crosthwaite, 21 April, 1842.


37 Pusey Papers, Churton to Gresley, 2 December, 1839.

38 Ibid., 30 November, 1839. In his estimate of Collier, Churton either contradicted himself or changed his mind: on 30 November, 1839, he wrote that "Collier is very dry and also too controversial." But on 30 December, 1840, he was convinced that "The only historian who tells the truth candidly is Collier, and his estimate of both sides is very impartial."

39 Ibid., 30 December, 1840.


41 Pusey Papers. Churton to Gresley, 5 March, 1839.
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48 See G. F. A. Best, Temporal Pillars; Queen Anne's Bounty, the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, and the Church of England (1964).
49 Churton, The English Church, p. 357. Massingberd held the same view: see The Policy of the Church of Rome Promoted by the Abuse of the Popal Supremacy, and the Remedy in Convocation (1852); cf. The English Reformation (1866), "Preface", p. xi.
50 Massingberd, The English Reformation (1842), p. 413; see pp. 349-52.
51 Correspondence of J. C. Crosthwaite, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. misc. e. 117, f. 134. Letter from E. Churton to J. C. Crosthwaite, 13 April, 1842.
53 Ibid., p. 415.
54 Ibid., pp. 237, 354-7.
56 Correspondence of J. C. Crosthwaite, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. misc. e. 117, f. 136. Letter from Edward Churton to J. C. Crosthwaite, 21 April, 1842.
58 Mass. MSS, 8/1. Journal, 30 September, 1842.
59 Ibid., 17 July, 1842.
60 The Christian Remembrancer, May, 1842, p. 591.
61 An inordinate amount of attention—more than half the book—was devoted to late-medieval church. Massingberd's motive, however, was misconstrued by the reviewer for The British Critic. The author believed Churton wrote to Gresley, "that it was necessary to shew fully the previous state of things, in order to justify the Reformation, as far as it can be justified". (Pusey Papers, Churton to Gresley, 10 May, 1842.)
62 In subsequent editions, Massingberd began the introductory chapter with the verse from Keble's Christian Year, "Speak gently of our Sister's fall . . ."
63 The British Critic, July, 1842, pp. 253-254.