Lincolnshire History and Archaeology Vol. 30, 1995

Lincolnshire’s Parson Poet Laureate

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While many are aware that the poet John Dyer was a Rector of Coningsby in the mid-eighteenth century, fewer may know that one of his predecessors was the Poet Laureate of his day. Such ignorance is excusable for, while Dyer may have been a minor poet, he is still remembered, whereas who nowadays is aware that among the Poets Laureate was a Laurence Eusden?

Even in his own day he was scarcely known. A contemporary wrote of him:

Eusden a laurel’d Bard, by Fortune rain’d,
Who has by few been read, by fewer prized.

He was of a good Irish family but was born in 1688 at Spottisworth in Yorkshire where his father was incumbent. A pupil of St. Peter’s School, York, he proceeded to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he had a successful career culminating in a fellowship at Trinity. His versifying began in 1713 and was designed to attract patronage. He met with success in 1717 as the result of an epilalathium on the occasion of the marriage of the Duke of Newcastle to the Lady Henrietta Godolphin. Soon thereafter the duke was appointed Lord Chamberlain of the Household. When Nicholas Rowe, laureate, died in 1718 the duke obtained the appointment for Eusden. Shortly beforehand he had been referred to in The St. James’ Evening Post as “a gentleman of great learning and merit.”

That was not an opinion shared by the world of letters where the appointment was condemned as jobbery. Oldnixon in Arts of Logick and Rhetorick (1728) dismissed Eusden in the following terms:

That of all the galimatias he [Oldnixon] ever met with, none came up to the verses of this poet, which have so much of the ridiculous and fantastic in them as can well be jumbled together, and are of that sort of nonsense which so perfectly confounds all ideas that there is no distinct one left in the mind.

The authors who quoted that criticism in the course of their account of the lives of the poets laureate placed Eusden at ‘the bottom of the ladder’. He might have ‘merited a better fame’ had he limited himself to scholarly translations from the classics in which ‘he displays some command of languages and smoothness of versification’. As it was his powers would have been better suited to the advertising demands of a later age: ‘He might have exhausted imagination in celebrating the virtues of blacking, or the praises of cheap clothing. Eusden kept to Cambridge, venturing little to London where he ‘was a mere name appearing in the newspapers twice a year’ on the occasions of his odes on New Year’s Day and the King’s Birthday. It was a month before his death at Coningsby on 27 September 1730 was published in The Universal Spectator of 31 October:

On Thursday came advice of the death of the Rev. Mr. Laurence Eusden, Poet Laureate to His Majesty and late Chaplain to the Right Honourable Richard, Lord Wiltoughby de Broke, at his living in the County of Lincoln.

If Eusden is remembered at all it is, as The Oxford Companion to English Literature (1984) put it, for his notorious drinking habits. The seven line entry refers to none of his works but quotes a couplet from The Dunciad referring to his fondness for drink. Apparently Pope later disclaimed his derogatory remarks about Eusden recognizing, it has been suggested, that ‘Eusden had a respectable character according to the standards of the day’. It may have been that his intemperance only became a scandal in his later years, Thomas Gray is reported as informing his friend and executor William Mason that ‘Eusden set out well in life, but afterwards turned out a drunkard and besotted his faculties.’

Sadly that is how Coningsby knew him: so he arrived and so, in consequence, he died within the year at the early age of forty-two. An account of this is to be found in a letter dated 17 February 1731 from the Reverend Henry Shepherd to Sir John Newton of Culverthorpe. This letter is reproduced at the end of the paper which will now be concerned with the individuals whom it introduces.

No attempt has been made to discover when Eusden was ordained. There is a scrap of paper bearing an unsigned note dated 6 November 1727 that reads as follows:

Mr. Eusden, Poet Laureate, presented 3 excellent poems. We hear that the Court being informed that he has been for some years in orders without any Benefice some ecclesiastical preferment will speedily be given him.

The note is among Newton papers included in the Monson archives; there is no indication of what interest the family had in Eusden at that time, nor is there any reason to link it with the presentation of Eusden to Coningsby three years later. It raises the question of why, if the Court were in favour of rewarding Eusden with a benefice, appropriate action was not immediately to follow. Was Eusden’s way of life already, even for that age, such that wiser councils prevailed?

Eusden was inducted to the living of Coningsby on 9 April 1730 on the presentation of William Colesworth of Cleavevel. The living had been held by the Reverend Richard Kelham from 1684 to 1720, he having been presented by Dymoke of Scrivelsby. Kelham was succeeded by his son, also Richard, but by that time the advowson had passed from Dymoke into Cotesworth hands. It would appear that by the time Eusden died the advowson was, once again, on the market. The young Henry Shepherd, interested in the vacancy, must have anticipated, wrongly as it transpired, that the Newton family would acquire the advowson. His letter to Sir John Newton is in that context.

Shepherd was born in 1703, son of the Reverend Richard Shepherd of Cleburne in Westmorland. He obtained his bachelor’s degree from Queen’s College, Oxford, followed by a master’s degree from King’s College, Cambridge. His first parishioner in Lincolnsire was at Mareham-le-Fen where he was Rector from 1728. It is not known how this young newcomer to the county became sufficiently acquainted with Sir John Newton of Culverthorpe to seek his aid in acquiring the rectory of Coningsby. Nor is it particularly clear why he should have presumed that there would be an interest. The Newton family had some land in Coningsby but perhaps a more substantial reason for their considering the acquisition of its advowson was that Sir John’s son, Sir Michael Newton K.B. was married to the Countess of Coningsby.

There is no particular purpose in speculating further, for the advowson passed to Gilbert Heathcote, John Heathcote and Sarah Coatesworth, recorded in the Lincoln Bishop’s Register 38 as presenting the Reverend Sloane Elsmore to the Rectory of Coningsby on 15 March 1731. Elsmore was a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, who subsequently gained a Doctorate in Divinity from Christ Church, Oxford. He held the Coningsby living for one year only being replaced by the Reverend Samuel Kershaw whom John Dyer succeeded in 1750. Kershaw’s presentation was by Gilbert Heathcote, alone. He was Sir Gilbert Heathcote (1651-1733), a Lord Mayor of London, one of the founders of the Bank of England, purchaser of the
Normanton estate in Rutland, the richest English commoner of the day.

He may have been more than a match for Sir Michael Newton, despite the Countess, his wife. Lady Margaret Newton, Countess of Coningsby, was of the family of Coningsby of Hampton Court, Hereford. Her father, Thomas Coningsby, Esquire, attended King William into Ireland and, at the Battle of the Boyne, being close to his majesty when the King received a slight wound in the shoulder, he was the first to apply a handkerchief to the hurt. He was then elevated to the Irish peerage. On the accession of George I in 1715 he was made a peer of Great Britain and chose to take his title from that place which shared his name: Baron Coningsby of Coningsby, county Lincoln. In 1719 he was further promoted to be the Earl of Coningsby. Margaret, his eldest daughter, received the honour in remainder to pass on to the heirs male. She and Sir Michael had the one son who died in infancy.

Henry Shepherd's letter which now follows is of interest not only specifically in respect of Laurence Eusden, but also generally as illustrative of the state of the church in the earlier eighteenth century.

Honoured Sir,

I had the honour of yours, & am not able to express the sense I have of your kindness in shewing such a readiness to serve me in the affair of Coningsby; I took your advice & immediately went over to Heydor-Thorp, but had the misfortune to be too late; Sir Michael himself was set out for London on the Saturday before, & the ladies were gone that morning a little before I got thither, which was the Wednesday after. Of this I took the liberty to advise you in a letter from Ancaster, & at the same time let you know that I 'cou'd not gain any farther satisfaction as to the truth of the report of Sir Michael's being a purchaser. We have now fresh advice that the living is disposed of to a clergyman in London; which, if true, as is most probable, since I believe it is within 3 weeks of lapsing to the presentess, I have nothing more to desire of you than that you 'w'd please to pardon the freedom I have taken, & the trouble I have given you on this affair.

Everyone in this neighbourhood was glad to hear that the advowson of Coningsby was likely to fall into the hands of Sir Michael Newton or any gentleman of character, the living has of late been so scandalously disposed of. Old Kellum had it from the Champion, I believe, upon very honourable terms, but his son had it from Mr Coatesworth upon very dishonourable ones. The common story is that he bought a horse of Mr Coatesworth for which he gave £200 - some say £500. It was obtain'd for Mr Eusden by some management of the same nature, tho' I believe without his being privy to it, I will set down the story as I heard it, from pretty good authority. Mr Eusden had for ten years or more before he died kept company with one Mrs Crisp a clergyman's daughter; in what familiarities they liv'd I know not but very severe reflections, & hard censures were passed upon them; and indeed 'tis to be feared his religion was not much better than his successor's in the Laureat's Place. But be that as it will, his fortune, as well as her (the little she had) was spent, & he was so much involved in debt that he knew not which way to turn him. Upon which two brothers of her's procured the living of Coningsby of Mr Coatesworth, with a view I suppose that Mr. Eusden might be induced to marry their sister, & have some place to retire to: but at the same time like prudent men, that they might not be losers, they assured Mr. Eusden that the living was not worth more than 60 pounds a year, & insisted that they might have a lease of the tythes at that rent, which he not knowing the true value of the living complied with & so received his presentation. When he came down to Coningsby he took up his lodgings in a little alehouse in the town, where he continued till a few days before he died, notwithstanding what there was a good house upon the living & he brought down furniture with him from London to furnish it. He had broke his constitution so much with drinking, that he was at last reduced to such an unhappiness that he 'cou'd not drink half a pint of ale or wine, without being intoxicated. When he was in this condition he presently lost all use of rent live long; became a perfect madman; & so by keeping himself continually warm he 'w'd remain thus for a long time together. He had the misfortune to get into one of these fits upon the road when he first came down, so that he was three weeks or more at Coningsby before he was capable of any business, even of going through the necessary qualifications upon his induction; & might have continued so much longer had not his mistress come down to his relief. She knowing whence his frenzy proceeded, by restraining him from drinking any strong liquor, in a little time brought him to his senses again. But his constitution was so much wasted with these frequent excesses, that it was apparent to every body he cou'd not live long; and that they had been in company with him, (which I never was for he neither gave nor received visits from any of his neighbours) say that his intellects were so much decay'd as his body, & his Genius, whatever it once was, tho' he believe it was never very great, was entirely drowned by his continual debauches. His possible he might have liv'd longer, had not the gentlewoman that was with him taken a wrong method. She wholly denied him anything that was strong, so that as he had a continual thirst upon him, he was obliged to drink something; small beer & water was all he cou'd command, which she freely allow'd him, thereto as much of as he pleas'd; this threw him into a dropsey and kill'd him in a very short time without help of any physic or apothecary. The poor man had but two shillings in his pocket when he died, & so was buried as meanly as a pauper that is buried at the parish charge. The woman & her family for as I am inform'd they are all naught, are I believe in some measure chargable with his misfortunes. She is a woman of so mean, & despicable a presence that is damaging any body, much more a Poet Laureat shou'd be infatuated with her. She administered to his effects as chief creditor for she does not pretend they ever were married. Besides other debts I hear that about a quarter of a year before he died he mortgaged the Laureat's place for £100. This is all I know of Mr. Eusden since he came into this country, which believing this account wou'd not be unacceptable to you, I have ventured to send to you, assuring you that the greatest part of it I can affirm to be true upon my own knowledge.

I am Sir with my most humble respects to your good Lady & well-wishes to all your Family your most obliged most obedient humble Servant

Henry Shepherd
Horncastle
February 17th/1731

Further light on the matter is provided by Eusden's inventory, which was as follows:

An inventory of the goods and chattels of the Rey'd Mr Lawrence Eusden late Rector of Coningsby in the County of Lincoln deceased, made, taken & apprized this 19th day of November 1730 by us whose names are underwritten.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the scullery brass etc.</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>00-00-00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the kitchen one pewter case with pewter, one jack &amp; iron in the chimney</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>19-08-08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the hall pictures, tables &amp; chairs, and one corner cupboard &amp; grate</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>00-00-00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the best chamber a chest of drawers a table glass &amp; screw store</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>00-00-00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In another chamber a table, reading desk &amp; some boards</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>10-00-00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His books and papers</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>03-03-03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the broughwe, brewing vessels</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>10-00-00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For things not seen and forgotten</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>01-01-01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry Shepherd Rector of Mareham</td>
<td>Robt Westfield</td>
<td>Nath Bircham</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Anna Crisp
Creditrix prima
23 Nov. 1730 J Fowler Seft.[3]

A striking feature, other than the modest total, is the small value of Eusden's books when contrasted with that of his brewing equipment. Its particular relevance lies in the fact that Henry Shepherd was the chief appraiser and also in the confirmation that Anna Crisp was the principal creditor. The consequent instrument of administration lists her, with Henry Crisp of Catton in Yorkshire and Richard Randall of Coningsby, as administrators of the estate. Henry Crisp was, presumably,
one of the brothers Shepherd mentions and would have been the son of the Reverend Henry Crisp of Monkton in Kent, born in 1656 and dying in 1736. He had proceeded from Eton College to King’s College, Cambridge, from where, after a brief fellowship, he went to Catton as vicar in 1685.19

Shepherd was more involved than his letter to Sir John indicated. This gives the impression of an outsider relaying hearsay rather than of one who had become involved, even if no more than as a clerical neighbour appropriately assisting in the formalities consequent on a colleague’s death. Whatever the involvement, he was in a position to know of the vacancy, to be aware of the delay in filling it and to surmise a possible lapse in patronage. The Newton interest in Coningsby would have been readily known. It was worth chancing his arm.

NOTES
4. ibid., pp.244-45.
6. ibid., p.113, n.2.
7. ibid., p.113.
10. Shepherd’s letter suggests that he was William Cotesworth: as such he corresponds with a son of William Cotesworth, M. P., of Fenchurch Street, London. He was born in 1693, proceeded from Sedbergh School to Wadham College, Oxford, where he matriculated in 1712 and from there to Peterhouse, Cambridge, graduating in 1715. J. A. Venn, Alumni Cantabrigienses.
11. Presumably Sarah Coatesworth was a kinswoman of William Cotesworth.
13. Almost six months elapsed between Eusden’s death and Elsmore’s induction. The presumption is that the delay was in danger of resulting in a lapse of the right of presentation.
14. This was Colley Cibber who had been educated at Grantham School.
15. The burial is recorded in the Coningsby register.
16. L.A.O. Inc.208/555. I am indebted to Mr Christopher Sturman for drawing my attention to this.
17. The Reverend James Fowler was Vicar of Horncastle from 1724 to 1779 and Headmaster of the Grammar School from 1733.
19. Venn, Alumni Cantabrigienses.