

**The Papers Of C.J. Blomfield Bishop Of London, 1828 -
1855**

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228 6" x 4" microfiche

Introduction

Charles James Blomfield (1786 - 1857), bishop of London from 1828 to 1856, was one of the most influential leaders of the Church of England during a critical period in its history. When he was appointed the established church was under severe attack, characterised by its enemies, as Owen Chadwick has observed, as "a reactionary body with masses of posts with no function but that of giving the sons of squires a decent income and a comfortable house in the country". In the revolutionary turmoil of the 1830s it seemed quite possible that the Church would be swept away. By the 1850s two decades of institutional reform and spiritual growth had ensured its survival. The sixty eight volumes of his papers in Lambeth Palace Library document both Blomfield's part in this transformation and the administration of the Church of England's most important diocese over twenty-five years.

The institutional framework of the Church of England of 1830 had remained substantially unchanged since the Reformation. A parish organisation inherited from the Middle Ages was incapable of serving the requirements of an increasingly urban, industrial society. Blomfield understood the urgent need for more clergy and churches in the cities if the established church were to recover its place as the Church of the mass of Englishmen. The Roman Catholics, granted civil rights in 1829, were growing in confidence, and the dissenters were influential in the towns. Urban slums were virtually pagan. In 1836 Blomfield founded the Metropolis Churches Fund for building fifty new churches in London. By the end of his episcopate he had consecrated two hundred new churches in the metropolis. A special fund was instituted for Bethnal Green, which in 1839 had two churches, one chapel and five clergy for a population of seventy thousand. By 1850 ten additional churches had been completed in this one of the poorest districts in London, and endowments provided from the revenues of redundant City of London churches.

At the same time the Church of England experienced a reinvigoration of its spiritual life, under the influence of the evangelical and Tractarian movements. Before 1830 the English clergyman had a role which was as much social as religious. Thereafter there was a rediscovery of the sacred mission of the priesthood and a growing view that the Church was something more than a department of State. Blomfield was influenced by this change of attitude and became strongly critical of 'fox-hunting parsons'. However, rediscovery of the priestly vocation led to a new interest in medieval and contemporary Roman Catholic forms of worship, with profound consequences for the Church of England. Some of the earliest ritual disputes arose in the diocese of London, beginning in 1842 with the bishop's visitation charge concerning rubrical observance. For the most part Blomfield tried to remain neutral, until ritualist practices verged upon Romanisation, and he was hostile to such blatant innovations as the use of the confessional at St. Barnabas, Pimlico, and suspicious of the revival of nuns. Two of London's ritualist incumbents, Frederick Oakeley and W.J.E. Bennett, resigned under pressure from Blomfield. When in 1850 the Roman Catholic Church introduced an Episcopal hierarchy into England he was in the forefront of the opposition to this 'papal aggression'.

In addition to his charge of the see of London, the bishop of London exercised an informal jurisdiction over Anglican congregations overseas, where there was no local Anglican bishop. In 1828 there were only five Anglican colonial bishops. By the time of Blomfield's death there were over thirty. Blomfield was closely involved with the expansion of the Church overseas, and in 1840 was instrumental in the foundation of the Colonial Bishops Fund. He himself consecrated five colonial bishops on a single day in 1842. Even after his jurisdiction ceased Blomfield maintained important contacts with the colonial church - Bishop Daniel Wilson of Calcutta for instance was a close friend. The Blomfield Papers contain a wealth of material for the history of the Church in the colonies, from the question of the supply of clergy to Australia and Tasmania in the 1830s to the foundation of the dioceses of Victoria and Labuan in the 1840s and 50s.

The overseas jurisdiction of the bishop of London included Anglican chaplaincies in foreign countries, principally in Europe and South America. The commercial expansion of England in the nineteenth century scattered her nationals over the globe as traders, engineers, seamen or railway navvies. Others retired abroad for reasons of health, or visited the continental spas, or took up temporary foreign residence for the education of their children. Concern for the spiritual well-being of this population grew during the first half of the nineteenth century, and under Blomfield the practice of granting licences to approved foreign chaplains became general. Blomfield's interest in the quality of religious provision for the English abroad is reflected in his papers, which give as a result some illuminating insights into the life of the expatriate communities in places as diverse as Antwerp, Buenos Aires and Madeira.

The Blomfield Papers are of singular importance as the record of the work of one of the architects of Victorian England. His correspondents include not only the leaders of the Church but prominent lay figures such as Shaftesbury, Edwin Chadwick and Miss Burdett-Coutts. In addition, some of the most interesting of Victorian clergyman officiated in the diocese of London and thus came within the bishop's purview - W.W. Champneys, Charles Kingsley, William Quekett, Nathaniel Woodard. The Papers are an indispensable record for the history of the Victorian Church and a rich source of material for the local history of London and its environs.

Richard Aspin

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World Microfilms Publications Ltd.
4/4 Central House
1 Ballards Lane
London
N3 1LQ
United Kingdom

Telephone +44 (0)20 8349 8171

Email info@worldmicrofilms.co.uk

<https://www.worldmicrofilms.co.uk/>