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RIGHT TO DISSENT

Michael Watts *The Dissenters [Vol II, The Expansion of Evangelical Dissent, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995, 911pp]* must become the classic study of dissent replacing the Skeats and Miall and H. W. Clark of earlier years, themselves still part of the advocacy of the Liberationist tradition. The project has grown over the years and so the present volume covering the period from the consolidation of the French Revolution [1791] to a terminal date which corresponds to the calling of the first Vatican Council and Forster's Education Act [1870], is Dr Watts's second but hopefully not the last. The sub-title of the volume identifies this period with the 'Expansion of Evangelical Nonconformity', though Watts is not neglectful of the story of those dissenters who were little affected by the Evangelical Revival, the Unitarians and those who shared their liberal theological sentiments.

Watts, who is well aware of the importance of his study for a proper understanding of nineteenth-century history, tells a good story which elegantly combines a strong narrative line with appropriate analysis. Far from being perturbed by the French Revolution, evangelical dissenters saw it as a working out

of providential purposes. In the ensuing wars they planned and implemented their own revolutionary plans for world mission: Watts shows how Thomas Coke's *Plan of the Society for the Establishment of Missions among the Heathens* of 1785 failed, during Coke's life time, to win the hearts of his fellow Methodists, whereas seven years later Carey's vision not only captured the imagination of his fellow Baptists but set the whole denomination in a missionary direction, both at home and abroad. Fortified by Fuller's modification of the Calvinist inheritance in *The Gospel Worthy of all Acceptation*, a new age of world mission and itinerancy and village preaching was begun. The principal evidence for the expansion of dissent is to be found in the Religious Census of 1851, here submitted to rigorous analysis. To this Watts adds such other 'hard' statistical evidence as he is able to obtain, including recent reference to C. D. Field's recent study of the gender balances amongst English dissenters in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, derived from his analysis of membership lists. Baptists, at 64.6%, are found to have had the highest percentage of women members, though only slowly were they permitted to share in the government of their congregations. Family clearly provided a context in which dissent was nurtured: John and Jean McFarlan, weavers from Paisley, joined the Particular Baptist church in Reading in 1782, and over the next 100 years 51 of their descendants joined the church, many serving as office holders. Amongst the New Connexion Baptists of the East Midlands the Goadby family offered similar service.

Watts also confirms what your editor has emphasized elsewhere that the working-class constituency of evangelical dissent has hitherto been seriously underestimated, backing up his judgment with sound statistical analysis. For example, he affirms that at least 50% of Baptists were drawn from the poor in nine out of fourteen counties, but that in Leicestershire, Monmouthshire and Suffolk the figure rises to over 80%. Joseph Drew, a Newbury Baptist, thought 75% of Baptists were working class. Moreover his analysis shows that far from dissent becoming more bourgeois as the century proceeded the reverse was true, as it registered success in mission work amongst the poor, though clearly individual Christians whose social status improved did on occasions seek to reflect that in changed ecclesiastical commitments. Watts shows how dogmatic landlords sought to control dissent, either by evicting dissenters from their cottages [as happened to Carey's sister, Anne, at Cottesbrooke in Northamptonshire], or denying dissenters sites for chapels. At Widmerpool in Nottinghamshire the landlord even went so far as to pull down the cottages occupied by General Baptists as a means of emptying the chapel, which he subsequently purchased at an advantageous price. By contrast, open parishes, or those without a resident landlord, offered more propitious opportunities for the establishment and growth of dissenters, as did large parishes with a number of townships but only one church.

For its part dissent is shown to have given only qualified support to the government in the context of the anti-revolutionary wars. In Northamptonshire the Baptist Chapel at Guilsborough was gutted by fire on Christmas Day 1792; in

Derby a lecturer of the Corresponding Society was allowed to lecture in a Baptist Chapel until a loyalist mob took action against both lecturer and chapel; in Nottingham in July 1793 in an incident in which the home of the Baptist mayor, the grocer Joseph Oldknow, was attacked because of the corporation's anti-war petition, a young man was killed. James Hinton and other dissenters were assailed in Woodstock on the charge of being 'Jacobin rascals'. William Carey, we are told, until he sailed for India, entertained republican sentiments, whilst the Norwich Baptist, Mark Wilks, preached two sermons to raise money for the defence of the radicals, Thomas Hardy, Horne Tooke and John Thelwall. But perhaps Andrew Fuller was more typical in arguing that political involvement too often caused a departure from religious commitment and that scripture enjoined obedience and loyalty to the regime. Nevertheless Watts also notes that Alderman Bull was one of the most loyal supporters of John Wilkes, and that he was the first man to be returned to parliament on an electoral promise in which he pledged to work a fairer electoral system. In Cambridge, Robert Robinson founded the Cambridge Constitutional Society, a commitment which was taken on by Robert Hall when he succeeded to the pastorate. Jeremiah Brandreth, a framework knitter who led the ill-fated Pentrich Revolution, claimed to be a Baptist. Joseph Harris, editor of *Seren Gomer* denounced the action of each member of the military at Peterloo as 'the inexcusable shedding of his neighbour's blood'. The alignment of dissent on further political issues is carefully traced, with the Unitarians becoming more and the Wesleyans less conservative. Both these traditions in fact receive ample consideration in this analysis. The chronicle is familiar - dissenting disabilities, anti-slavery, franchise reform, curbing of the establishment, Chartism and the Anti-Corn Law League, and the conflict over education - but all is well done. Though generally a cautious scholar whose revisions of a number of existing stereotypes are very much to be welcomed, Watts is sometimes led into tendentious judgments when a potential epigram seems to tempt: viz, 'Industrialization freed men from the control of the Church, urbanization freed them from the influence of religion.' [p126] The 911 pages of this *magnum opus* are remarkably free from error though I think that Paul Stigant's work on 'Methodism and the Working Class' should be identified as Keele MA, 1968, rather than Manchester PhD, 1972 [p75]. Space is found to introduce readers to nonconformist styles of architecture, patterns of worship, church finance and government [including a wealth of information on the remuneration of Baptist ministers] and to the way in which discipline was exercised within churches which inveighed against the theatre, novel-reading and any breach of sabbatarian principles. Tracing the way in which evangelical dissenters came to embrace teetotalism, Watts records Spurgeon's worry that demands for abstinence could displace the all crucial need for conversion. The volume concludes with an analysis of the nature of the 1859 Revival, noting that in that year also Darwin published the first edition of his *Origin of Species*