

William Cole

ASPECTS OF AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CLERGYMAN

By Rev. FRANK BAKER, B.A., B.D.

MANy people think that there were only two types of clergy in the eighteenth century, the pluralistic pagan and the rarer down-at-heel saint. Undoubtedly both types existed. The bulk of the clergy, however, were neither all bad nor all good. They were men who faithfully carried out the pastoral duties expected of them, whilst reserving their chief enthusiasm for their particular hobby, be it gardening or gossiping, the classics or the chase.

A fascinating glimpse into the life of such a clergyman is afforded in the Journals of the Rev. William Cole, M.A., F.S.A. (1714-82), some of whose hundred manuscript volumes are now being edited and presented to the public.

William Cole had a good education at Eton, where he was a schoolfellow of the great Horace Walpole, of letter-writing fame, and afterwards at Clare Hall and King's, Cambridge. He joined in the usual frivolities of youth, even to the extent of clipping a lock of hair from the head of a 'fair charmer'—which souvenir was demanded back by the same lady's daughter thirty years later, as he 'could have no use for it'! For Cole had not married the former owner of the hair. He had remained a bachelor, a bachelor with a bent for dusty scholarship, perusing faded documents with spectacles perched on the end of his nose, and addicted to quaint spelling fads.

Cole became an antiquary of some reputation, but of his many manuscripts probably the most interesting is that which contains his personal journal for the years 1765-70. His engaging frankness about the trivialities and trials of his life as a country parson, and about the idiosyncrasies of his neighbours, rendered it a very wise precaution to bequeath those

manuscripts to the British Museum with the condition—

that none of them may be inspected or looked into until twenty years after my decease, but all be put up into a large chest or box which I brought out of Portugal, locked and fastened with two iron hoops till that time be expired.

As Rector of Bletchley, in Buckinghamshire, keeping in touch with 'the right people' was regarded as part of his duty. There are many records in his journal of ceremonial tea-visits made and returned, sometimes with neighbouring clergy, sometimes with 'the gentry', and occasionally with real aristocracy. He was not greatly enamoured of clerical gatherings in general, although he mentions one which impressed him for a very interesting reason:

I went to our new Archdeacon's Visitation at Newport Pagnel. . . . The most numerous Appearance of Clergy that I ever remember: 44 dined with the Archdeacon, &, what is extraordinary, not one smoaked Tobacco.

Let it not be thought that Cole had no time for what John Wesley would have called 'chit-chat'. He had. He enjoyed a good meal in good company, with a game of cards to follow. He was an amused listener to the silly scandal which does little harm except give away completely the retailer's lack of character, as when a visitor babbled to him—

that Miss Plumptre married my Godson Ward without the Knowledge or Consent of her Parents; that her Aunt had just left her £10,000 independent of her Father, which enables her to marry Mr. Ward, who has no Profession, no Fortune, & no Economy: & that she made the Offer herself.

Occasionally the scandal he had to hear was of a graver nature.

Mr. Hanmer told me a scandalous story of Mr. Felton Hervey, his 2 Daughters & a favourite Footman:

In this case Cole will record no details in his journal, but simply comments, 'I hope it is not true'.

At this time the gambling fever was working havoc with many upper-class people. Even Cole, usually very careful in money matters, occasionally makes an entry such as this:

Mr. Natl. Cartwright came from London last Night & brought me a Lottery Ticket No. 14 o 61. which cost £11 14s. 6d., with the 6d. for Registering it.

His ventures almost invariably turned up 'Blanc'.

Generally speaking, however, Cole felt happier in more natural and homely country pursuits. His roots spread deeply into the life of the countryside. He has much to say about his garden, his bees, his pigs, his cows, his horses. He writes to Walpole:

Thus Day by Day Time passes under me, and I think myself happy that I can so amuse myself with such Trifles as to be unconcerned with what is going forward in the World.

And Walpole writes to him:

You are the only real philosopher I know.

Cole's journal, therefore, does not chronicle the events of political and international significance which were undoubtedly happening at the time, but the things that were of importance only in his own little world—'Bees swarmed', 'Cow calved'. Domestic details find a prominent place in his records. Various purchases of Wedgwood Cream Ware are noted, one consignment of which cost:

A middle-sized Terrine & Dish, 8 sh. A Doz: of Soup Plates, 5s. a Doz.; of flat Plates 5s., & 4 very small oval Dishes 2s. 6d., with a Box 1s. 6d. in all—£1 2s. 2d.

(Incidentally, he can never quite make up his mind how to spell 'tureen'—in addition to the above attempt he occa-

sionally uses 'terreen' and 'turin'.) Cole's domesticity even leads him solemnly to record the periodical upheaval of 'Washing', and 'Ironing', as well as the more masculine pursuit of 'Brewing'.

All Cole's monetary dealings are exhibited to us without distortion or concealment. In them we notice the inborn thrift of the countrydweller. We see how the two-days-old calf brings in 15s., and how he sells half his pig at '4 Pence Half-Penny a Pound, in all 52 Pound, viz: £1 os. 6d.'. We sympathize with him as he tries to get rid of an accumulated store of books, and with his annoyance when the bookseller, Benjamin White, writes to him about 'an abatement of 15 sh. for the Imperfection of Cranmer's & Parker's Bibles & other Deductions', which leads him to the bitter comment 'no one ought to deal with these People but for a Certainty'.

This by no means unusual distaste at unnecessarily parting with money is seen once more against the background of the eighteenth-century post office. In those days Members of Parliament were privileged to 'frank' letters for free postage. This privilege was greatly abused to assist friends and voters, so that the regulations were tightened, allowing free postage only to letters 'Whereof the whole superscription shall be of the Hand Writing of such Member'. Shortly after this new law came into force, Cole's journal records:

Jem brought me a Letter from the Post Office from Mr. Walpole, inviting me to fetch from Strawberry Hill the Porcelain of St. Cloud & Pastilles which he had brought me from Paris. I sent him another Letter with one inclosed in it to Mr. Masters, desiring him to frank it to him, by directing it to him in his own Hand, according to the new Act of Parliament.

One of the most interesting features in the life of the countryside as seen in Cole's Bletchley Journal is the refined barter system that operated. For example, different families purchased different

newspapers and magazines, in order that they could be exchanged after perusal. Cole had to complain on one occasion:

Sent to Mrs. Willis's Servants to tell them except they brought me News Papers to me more regularly that they might fetch them themselves for the future from Fenny Stratford, as I had the Trouble 3 Times a week to send my Servants there for her Lrs (letters) for these 7 years, & sometimes on Purpose, besides that she had a *Critical Review* & 2 Magazines every Month & a *Cambridge Chronicle* every week from me, and yet I seldom had the Paper 'till next Day'.

As for eatables or growables, there was a constant interchange, with unwritten rules, the value of the gifts varying with the giver's estimate of his own social standing. In the case of the very poor, of course, 'Thank 'ee kindly, I'm sure, sir!' and a touch of the cap, were considered sufficient reward, together with the glow of happiness engendered by true 'charity'. Typical of many entries are the following:

We all went & drank Tea & supped & play'd at Cards at Mr. Cartwright's, to whom I gave several Shrubbs & Flowers out of the Garden, & also to Gaffer Hart the gardener of Bow-Brickhill, who brought me a Present of Pears. Mrs. Wood brought me a fine Hare & Snipe.

Mrs. Willis sent me 6 Pigeons, there being none in my Dovehouse yet fit to take, & I sent her some Asparagus which I forced on an Hot Bed.

Mr. Rowley sent me a brace of very fine Trout, & a Lobster, by Mr. Ja: Cartwright: one of which I sent to Mrs. Willis, & Mr. Cartwright dined with me, it being a delightful Day, under the Walnut Tree in the Yard, the Hay being then putting on the Cock. Mr. Reddall of Simpson sent me a good Peice of Sturgeon.

Mr. Troutbeck gave me a Dozen Bottles of Meade. I promised him as many of Raisin Wine. I carried Mr. Reddall in my Chaise from Woughton to Simpson & gave him a Dozen of Peaches for his little girls, & as many to Mrs. Troutbeck.

This is not to suggest, of course, that Cole only gave presents as do small

children and the 'sinners' in the Gospels—to receive as much again. He merely fell in with the customs of his time and neighbourhood. And he went the second mile. He was, in addition, an extremely good neighbour, overlooking injuries, and lending a helping hand wherever it was needed, as witness the following:

Lent Mr. Ja: Cartwright a tolerable good Picture of 5 Foot by 2 & an half, of a Spaniel & Bittern to put over his Chimney Peice 'till he can get one to fit the Place, he having papered his best Parlour & left naked that Part of the Wall.

There are constant records of gifts in money or kind to the poor and distressed. One entry reads:

I sent Plumbs & Codlins & Cabbages out of my Garden to my Neighbours.

In addition to such gifts when Nature had been generous, Cole seemed to make a speciality of sending servants across to sick folk with 'warm dinners'. In August he mentions that:

Tom bottled off the Half Hogshead of Raisin Wine, which I make for the Poor People when they are ill.

He tells also how he—

paid Wm. Travel £21 3s. 6d. for last year's Malt, besides a Brewing from Mr. Lord of Mursley & one from Wm. Bradbury & a Pipe of Cyder: so that my Cellar costs me the last year above 30 Pounds: tho' I never touch a Drop of Ale myself & rarely drink any Thing better than Small Beer.

William Cole was undoubtedly interested in the material welfare of his parishioners. One is even inclined to suspect that it often blinded him to their spiritual needs. He did not want his people to be too 'religious'. Any signs of religious enthusiasm he profoundly distrusted, and Dissenters were to his mind the source of all evil. When the newspapers recorded that the late Bishop of Salisbury had left £150,000 he refused to believe it, writing indignantly:

I look upon this to be one of the many Arts made use of by our Dissenters & Deists, to belie & bespatter the Church of England in the Common News Papers which are circulated all over the Kingdom.

Another incident on January 16, 1766, shows his feelings towards Dissenters:

Hard Frost. . . . I married John Hinchley to Elizabeth Crane in the Church, but desired them to come into the Parlour to sign the Book & for me to write the Entry into it, as it was so cold. When I was got there, they had got the Child there to be baptised: & when that was done, the Mother begged that I would also church her. As it was absurd to do it in a Parlour; yet as I had just baptised the Child there & as the Woman was pressing to have it done, being ashamed to appear publicly: & as the Discipline of our Church, thro' the Practices of the Dissenters, is now so relaxed as to come to nothing, there is no parlying with your Parishioners on any Point of Doctrine or Discipline: for if you are rigid, they will either abstain from all Ordinances, or go over to the Dissenters: so I complied with her Request.

In view of such feelings it occasions little surprise to find Cole expressing a hearty distaste for Methodists, who were often mistakenly classed with the Dissenters. After he had already accepted a new living at Waterbeach, near Cambridge, he made a disturbing discovery:

The Town, it seems, is above half full of Methodists, made so by Mr. Berridge of Clare Hall: if I had known as much at first I believe I should not have thought of it.

One of his first duties in his new parish was to marry two of these Methodists!

Even these despised Methodists had their uses, however, and must be tolerated, for—

My Neighbour Baxter the Methodist Teacher agreed to let me put my Tonkin Sow in his Yard & to use a Lodge for Straw for my Horses, which will be much more convenient for me than to build a new Lodge in the most dirty Yard imaginable.

However, Cole still felt very uncomfortable amongst these hearty, religious

people. His feelings are summed up in a letter to one of his former parishioners:

But the Greif of Greif is yet behind: the Parish swarms with Methodists: my 2 neighbours on each side of me are such, & opposite to me the same: & indeed, look which way I will, the same Heresy stares me in the Face. Yet such is my wretched Situation, that I am obliged to be more than ordinary Civil to these Enemies of the Church and Clergy. Only think how this must mortify my High Church Spirit? for having no Place to lay my Dunghill in, on one Side, I am obliged to pay Court, & hire a Bit of a Yard of a methodistical or presbyterian Baker, who gives leave to clear my Stable by a Back Door into it: on the other Side, divided from him by a slight Paling, I am forced to go Cap in Hand to a little Pert Teacher among them, by Profession a Collar Maker: this Brother Preacher accomodates me with his Barn for my Chaise to stand in, for the Lodge or Hovel built for it by my Landlord, happens to be neither lofty nor deep enough to receive it. I leave you to guess how agreeable these Things must be to my orthodox Stomach! especially when I can't cross the Yard to go into my poor Business of a Garden, but this mechanical Teacher, with the usual puritanical Assurance and Forwardness, must needs greet me every Time he sees me with Good Morrow! or How d'ye, Neighbour?

No, Rev. William Cole, M.A., F.S.A., had no liking for Methodists. Yet in reading his journals one is inclined to smile at his undoubtedly strong prejudices, regarding them as a weakness for which he should be pitied rather than as a crime for which he should be punished. One feels that he was in the grip of the conservatism of the countryside, like many before and after him, and therefore was not prepared to recognize true progress. Nor was his life and work valueless. Within his own narrow limits he laboured honestly and helpfully, though he certainly did not bring about a revival of religion. Perhaps his outlook and influence can best be summed up in a reversal of John Wesley's famous phrase, 'The world is my parish'. William Cole could truthfully have said, 'The Parish is my World'.