

AN EARLY INFLUENCE ON CLARENCE BICKNELL: THE REV. ROWLAND WILLIAM CORBET (1839-1919)

By Valerie Browne Lester, 25 January 2015

Clarence Bicknell entered Trinity College, Cambridge, when he was 19. Recently orphaned — his father Elhanan died that very year and his mother Lucinda had died when he was 9 years old — he was sorely in need of supportive friends and role models. Clarence had been brought up in his father's Unitarian faith, a tolerant, open-minded faith that was an offshoot of the Protestant Reformation. It eschewed ritual and preached religious freedom, the oneness of God, and the unity of creation. It was condemned by the mainstream Church of England, and its members were often persecuted and referred to as "Dissenters." When Clarence arrived at Cambridge, he drifted away from Unitarianism and fell under the influence of members of the Oxford Movement, whose principles were in direct opposition to the Unitarians'. They wanted to return the Anglican church to its pre-Reformation, Catholic roots. The zeal of its adherents attracted Clarence, and he soon joined the movement, finding solidarity with its members and a sense of purpose. Rowland Corbet, two years ahead of Clarence at Trinity, was the member of the Oxford Movement at Cambridge to have the greatest influence on him, and would be a central figure in Clarence's life in the years to come.

Clarence's interest in theology was also enhanced by conversations with his tutor at Trinity, Joseph Barber Lightfoot, arguably the greatest Bible scholar of his day, who later became Bishop of Durham. Soon after his arrival at Cambridge, Clarence had himself christened in the Church of England, firmly turning away from his father's Unitarianism.

As soon as he was awarded his B.A. in mathematics, Clarence took the first steps towards becoming an Anglican priest. In 1866 he was ordained a deacon in the Church of England and was soon appointed as a curate of St. Paul's, Walworth, Surrey, along with two of his friends from Trinity. The three young men, the vicar's "three gallants," toiled arduously for the good of this poorest of parishes, all the while celebrating the Christian faith in the most flamboyant and ritualistic Anglo-Catholic manner. Visiting preachers made a point of coming to the church, and among those was Clarence's mentor from Cambridge, the Rev. Rowland Corbet.

Image, right. The reverend Rowland Corbet, rector of Stoke upon Tern, in 1862. Son of Richard and Eleanor Corbet of Adderley Hall.

Corbet must have had something of the appeal of a snake charmer to have succeeded in tempting 12 young men to follow him to his newly-formed Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit (Societas Sanctus Spiriti) at Stoke-on-Tern, a tiny village in the depths



of the Shropshire countryside. Corbet preceded them to Stoke-on-Tern, where his father, the lord of the manor, offered him the living at the parish church. The church itself having been ruined in a fire, Corbet set about rebuilding it with the help of the local population (including Thomas Dutton, the Shropshire giant) and the newly-arrived band of brothers, including Clarence.

Clarence lived at Stoke-on-Tern for nearly six years (1873-1878). He was housed with the other brothers in parish buildings, and they all continued to uphold the ideals and rituals of the Anglo-Catholic church. Clarence was a founding member and administrator of the Stoke-on-Tern Temperance Society at whose meetings he often performed, singing, playing the piano, reciting poems, and giving lectures. His lecture on “Wild Flowers” was particularly well-received.

But how did he spend the rest of his time in such a remote enclave? No doubt, he spent many hours in prayer and religious debate, and we can count on Clarence’s rambling throughout the countryside, botanizing. But the hours must have dragged and spiritual questions must have constantly plagued him. Corbet himself was beginning to have serious doubts about his mission, and that too may have affected Clarence who finally made the decision to leave Stoke-on-Tern. At the beginning of 1878 he headed out into the wider world, and began the process of turning his back on organized religion.



Image, right. Mrs Christine Corbet, May 1885. Stoke on Tern. Christine, born in Germany, Oldenburg, of a wealthy German family, was the wife of the reverend Rowland Corbet, rector of Stoke upon Tern.

As for Corbet, he disbanded the brotherhood, became a mystic and a popular speaker, and married in 1884.

Note from Valerie Browne Lester:

As part of my work in preparing a biography of Clarence Bicknell, I am trying to reconstruct Clarence’s education and religious life. I do need lots more information and would be grateful for your help in filling any gaps.

For instance, we know that Clarence and at least three of his older brothers “were educated in Brighton.” Which school did they attend or were they taught by private tutors? Any family records on this? I have written to several schools in Brighton, but have so far drawn a blank. Any ideas?

I am also looking for more information about the history of the Oxford movement as it was practiced at Cambridge, and more specifically at Clarence’s college, Trinity. The archivist at Trinity has not come up with anything so far.

Rowland Corbet appears to be a fascinating character, and bears fleshing out. We are making every effort to find more information but, in the meantime, the above is what we know so far about him and his relationship with Clarence.