

Article reprinted from *CrossWay* Issue Autumn 2011 No. 122

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

LORD ASHLEY – 7th EARL OF SHAFTESBURY (1801-1885)

Compassionate Christian Conservative

By David Hilton

RICHARD TURNBULL *Shaftesbury: The Great Reformer*. Lion 2010.

JOHN POLLOCK *Shaftesbury: The Poor Man's Earl*. Hodder & Stoughton 1985.

GEORGINA BATTISCOMBE *Shaftesbury: A Biography of the Seventh Earl*. Constable 1974.

'No man has ever done more to lessen the extent of human misery or to add to the sum total of human happiness', claims Georgina Battiscombe. William Hague calls him *'one of our country's most effective and successful politicians.'* David Bebbington says, *'few statesmen have served the poor and marginalized in their day more than Lord Shaftesbury.'*

When the Earl died in 1885, such was the nation's love and respect for this leading Evangelical Anglican Christian that a national funeral service was organized in Westminster Abbey. As Pollock puts it, *'the slums of London seemed to have converged on the Abbey in a spontaneous mourning such as England had never seen. As one poor man exclaimed, "Our Earl's gone! God Almighty knows he loved us, and we loved him. We shall not see his like again."*

Non-Compassionate Family Upbringing

Anthony was the firstborn son (there were three elder sisters) of Cropley Ashley-Cooper and Anne Spencer-Churchill. Anthony described his father as a cold-hearted bully and his mother as neglectful, only interested in social life. However, after his father's death, his mother would become a convert to Evangelical Christianity and a supporter of her son's philanthropy. His father, the sixth Earl of Shaftesbury, was a Tory politician in the House of Lords.

Anthony was unhappy at boarding school, and even more unhappy being at home in school holidays. However, the family house-keeper, Maria Mills, an Evangelical, showed him affection, read the Bible to him and taught him how to pray. He would treasure the present of her watch, which he wore for the rest of his life.

In 1811 he became 'Lord Ashley'. In 1813 he was sent to Harrow public school. He later told a story of how on Harrow Hill, he witnessed drunken men carrying a pauper's coffin, with no-one mourning the death of this poor child. Anthony resolved 'with the help of God' to devote his life 'to pleading the cause of the poor and friendless.' This resolve he would put into practice years later after his Evangelical conversion.

Choosing Life's Pathway

Lord Ashley obtained an honours degree in classics at Oxford University. In August 1823 he began a Grand Tour of Europe, visiting Italy, and then Vienna, where he fell in love with Antoinette von Leykam, a Roman Catholic. By Summer 1825 the affair was over, and he returned to England.

In June 1826 he and his cousin were elected to the House of Commons as Tory members for Woodstock. Both Tory and Whig governments noted his abilities, and would offer him Cabinet posts. These would be declined.

His first good cause as an MP concerned Pauper Lunatics and Lunatic Asylums. Lord Ashley himself suffered depression, and was highly sensitive. But for God's grace, he could himself have

ended up in an asylum. Given his character flaws stemming from his upbringing, it is even more amazing what he would achieve. He would devote 57 years to the cause of treating rather than neglecting lunatics. He witnessed the neglect of these helpless people, and his compassion would not allow him to 'pass by on the other side.'

The big political question in 1828-9 was Catholic Emancipation, as Catholics then were not admitted to Parliament. Lord Ashley was convinced that Emancipation was not only inevitable, but desirable. By speaking and voting in favour of it, he annoyed his father.

Conversion & Marriage

Since we do not have Lord Ashley's own testimony, there is a dispute by historians about the date of his conversion to Evangelicalism. Battiscombe puts it as late as 1835. I agree with Turnbull that 'the pivotal date in Ashley's process of conversion' was 1826. It was then that he was reading Philip Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* and Thomas Scott's Bible commentary. Lord Ashley later said that reading Doddridge 'was one of the first things that opened my eyes.'

In the 1830s Lord Ashley came under the influence of a former secretary of the Church Missionary Society, Edward Bickersteth (1786-1850). He adopted Pre-Millennialist views regarding the return of Christ (see Turnbull, pages 228-232.)

On 10 June 1830 Ashley married Lady Emily Cowper ('Minnie'), who came from a Whig family, at St George's, Hanover Square. Minny's joyful nature provided the right remedy for Ashley's depressive temperament.

Political Life and Good Causes

In the 1830 general election Ashley became MP for Dorchester in Dorset, then in 1831 for the county seat for Dorset.

Lord Ashley began a correspondence with Robert Southey, Poet Laureate and biographer of John Wesley. Southey described Ashley as 'a right-minded young man, deeply imbued with religious principles and feelings.' Southey alerted him to the scandal of child labour in northern mines and factories, and to the cruelties inflicted on 'climbing boys' who swept chimneys.

Michael Sadler, a Yorkshire Evangelical Tory, had led a campaign in Parliament to restrict children's working hours to ten. When Sadler lost his seat in 1833, Ashley took up the cause, becoming champion for the 'white slaves.'

Needing to rouse an apathetic Parliament about the plight of these children, Ashley had to be both singleminded and un-self-seeking. For him it was a religious as well as a political cause. He became an eloquent orator over time.

Lord Ashley would do more than any other English politician to lessen the poor's physical hardships, to provide education for their minds through supporting the 'Ragged Schools' and the gospel message for their immortal souls. He had taken up the measure as a 'matter of conscience.'

Christian Belief and Action

By 1840 Lord Ashley was regarded as the leading Evangelical layman, and one of the leaders of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England. He was a leading light in societies such as the Church Missionary Society, the Religious Tract Society, the British and Foreign Bible Society, and the Church Pastoral Aid Society. He was in demand as either a speaker or a chairman when they held their annual meetings each May.

Ashley clashed with High Churchmen when he encouraged the use of lay Christians in these Societies. He opposed plans for the Church of England to be run by a purely clerical convocation.

Lord Ashley was a cousin of Dr Pusey, the Tractarian leader. Although he was strongly opposed to Tractarian beliefs and practices, they did unite against attacks being made against Scripture and its doctrines.

Political Life

Lord Ashley's political speeches and actions stemmed from conviction and principle. He and Minny were sometimes guests of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert at court. He had mixed feelings about the marriage of Minny's mother, Lady Cowper, to Lord Palmerston.

Lord Ashley never abandoned any good cause he adopted, and added others to his burden of work. He had an accurate knowledge of detailed facts, which he drew on in his advocacy of good causes in Parliament. He believed he was fighting God's battles, and this gave him the inner strength to persist in his campaigns.

Ashley and Minny had five sons to educate, and four daughters to provide for. They struggled financially, only having enough money for necessities. This remained the case after his father's death in June 1851, when he became the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, and entered the House of Lords.

The Poor Man's Earl

When Lord Palmerston became Prime Minister, he sought Shaftesbury's advice when appointing bishops in the Church of England. Shaftesbury suggested 'men who would preach the truth, be active in their dioceses, be acceptable to the working people, and not offensive to Nonconformists.' Many of those appointed were Evangelicals.

Shaftesbury worked closely with the Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, in his charitable work. Shaftesbury supported both evangelistic initiatives and social welfare. The latter was fostered both through government intervention and voluntary action. Shaftesbury did not speak of human rights, but rather of responsibility and duty.

Shaftesbury was committed to the co-operation of Evangelical Christians across denominations, both with respect to evangelism and social welfare. His preference for and his commitment to the Prayer Book liturgy did not prevent his co-operation with Nonconformist Evangelicals. Nothing should get in the way of gospel preaching or hold back practical Christian action.

For these objectives, Shaftesbury believed that lay agency was 'absolutely and essentially necessary.' Mission and social effort needed committed laymen as well as clergy. He particularly supported the laymen workers of the London City Mission.

In his diaries, Shaftesbury frequently referred to the hope of our Lord's return in person, and his future reign on earth. He believed that he must give an account of the gifts of rank and station at the day of judgment. He did not speculate on the date of Christ's return, but lived out his Christian life in the expectation of his return. This expectation did not lead to withdrawal from the world, but involvement in it.

Final Days

Minny had died in 1872. Shaftesbury was sprightly and active until his final illness. In June 1884 he presided over Spurgeon's fiftieth birthday celebrations at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. By May

1885, when he presided at the annual meetings of the Bible Society at Exeter Hall, his physical strength was weakening. He died peacefully on 1 October 1885.

Shaftesbury had worked hard in Christian service for almost sixty years, and his impact on British public life was enormous. He believed that the State should operate on Christian moral and social values, and that welfare is best carried out by Christian voluntary societies. He saw the Evangelical voluntary societies as practical expressions of faithful Christian discipleship.

Shaftesbury was a man of integrity, courage, consistency, persistence and passion. 'He showed to the nation true Christian discipleship, leadership and service.'

The poor adults and children of nineteenth century England had much to thank Shaftesbury for, and thronged to attend his state funeral. He deserves a special place in our school history curriculum, and is part of our nation's Christian heritage. We need to follow his example in our age.

David Hilton, is a Lay Preacher and retired civil servant living in Wellingborough, Northants.