**WHEN THE SAINTS …**

11TH APRIL GEORGE AUGUSTUS SELWYN

16TH APRIL ISABELLA GILMORE

17TH APRIL STEPHEN HARDING

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GEORGE AUGUSTUS SELWYN [1809-78] – George was a man of many parts, all of which served him well when he was sent out as the first Bishop of New Zealand at the age of 32 in 1841 having distinguished himself at Eton, where one of his schoolmates was John Henry Newman – and at Cambridge where he was made Doctor of Divinity. Ordained in 1833, Selwyn served his curacy at Windsor.

He was a well-connected and able young man and following the adoption of New Zealand into the British Commonwealth in 1840 Selwyn was chosen as its first bishop, having shown some previous interest in the territory and its people. He learned Maori, so that when he arrived, only ten weeks after his consecration, he was equipped to undertake his visitations not only by this, but because he had learned to sail a boat. He travelled over a land with few enough roads, bridges and very little other infrastructure of any other kind.

Selwyn was able to visit the Maoris and gather information about their problems, many of which centred on greedy colonists and land companies trying to buy their land and manipulate or drive them from it. When, in 1855 the Maori wars broke out Selwyn came out as a champion of Maori rights, and received brick-back from both sides, as peacemakers usually do, but he found himself in real danger as well.

1854 found him back in England with plans to create new dioceses for the north and south island, and for a synod of New Zealand, the first of which took place in 1859. He also interested himself in the nearby British colonies in Melanesia, and it was by his inspiration and instigation that a diocese was created there, with its first bishop, John Coleridge Patterson.

Selwyn had much to do with the foundation of the Lambeth Conference of Bishops, and his own constitution for the New Zealand church influenced those of others, and after 27 years in New Zealand, in 1868 at the age of 58, he was persuaded to return to England and be consecrated Bishop of Lichfield.

He married, with two sons, John, who became the second Bishop of Melanesia after Patterson had been killed by tribesmen, and Selwyn College in Cambridge is named after him.

George, meanwhile, lived the remainder of his life in Lichfield.

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ISABELLA GILMORE [1842-1925] – Isabella was one of the eleven siblings of William Morris but he saw them very little in adult life so that she is rarely referred to by his biographers.

She married a naval officer, but after his death she wished to become a nurse, despite protests from her family, because nursing was still regarded as an un-lady-like profession. Nevertheless she worked at Guys Hospital before being invited by Bishop Thorold of Rochester to become a pioneer for the work and ministry of deaconess in his diocese. Having overcome her initial reluctance, Mrs Gilmore and the bishop planned its work and role to function alongside the ordained ministry. A house called North Side was assigned in Clapham for training, later named Gilmore House in her memory.

Mrs Gilmore was not the first woman to head up a religious community, but the difference was that, as she wrote in 1907, it was not possible to be released from this form of ministry in the same way that a female Religious could dispense with a vow, but that the role gave the woman a character and status for life. In practice, however, the ministry itself seemed to be confined to taking Sunday schools, and undertaking women’s groups of one sort or another. In the specially dedicated training centre, Mrs Gilmore trained up seven other heads of ministry for deaconesses in other dioceses, but the status of a deaconess seemed to be nothing more than yet another prop for the parish priest.

The Lambeth Conference of 1922 recommended that the Order of Deaconess be the only one to be made use of in future for women, but a subsequent gathering in 1930 made it clear that the work of a deaconess is not equal to that of a deacon, and that it was outside the ordained ministry and merely supplementary and complementary to it. It is all too easy to understand the head of anger and frustration that built up in women of faith and dedication that finally led to women’s ordination first, of course, as deacons, and once this had come about the Order was abolished.

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STEPHEN HARDING [d.1134] – For whatever reason, Stephen Harding seems to have been dropped from the Anglican calendar since his inclusion by Robert Atwell in 1999. The recent anthology by Kathleen Jones omits his name, as does ‘Saints on Earth,’ another ‘official’ Anglican publication. For some equally mysterious reason, he also seems to have been rather overlooked by the Cistercian Order itself, which, but for Stephen’s abbacy of 24 years, may well not even have made it as a footnote in church history.

The problem seems to have been that Bernard of Clairvaux who upstaged him in life and galloped to canonisation very soon after death, has continued to obliterate Stephen’s memory very largely ever since. It was Stephen ‘s abbacy that supervised the formation of Bernard’s crowd, and had Bernard ever found the humility and self-discipline to hold to Stephen’s training and stay out of controversy, the better part of Bernard’s work – much of his writing, his spiritual direction and his legacy and reputation would be less chequered.

In fairness, Stephen’s article in the ‘Oxford Dictionary of Saints’ suggests that everything relating to him was written some time after his death, and that very little other than letters exists in writing by him, so that his true position in the history of the church is still to be evaluated. One might have thought that existing records speak for themselves.

Stephen was an Englishman who achieved international repute: he was described by William of Malmsbury as being liked by all; gentle and ‘merry in the Lord’. He belongs here with the rest.

He was born in the southwest of England, perhaps in Somerset, and was ‘offered’ as an oblate at Sherborn Abbey. William of Malmsbury tells us that he thought Stephen had left the abbey to return to lay life and to go travelling in Scotland and France, where he studied the liberal arts before his conversion. He made his way to Rome visiting various monasteries along the way and reading the whole Psalter every day.

On returning to France, Stephen became a monk at Molesme, still a foundation less than 25 years old, where St Robert [of Molesme] was abbot: but both found themselves dissatisfied with the observances there, which seemed to be based on neither reason nor authority; so together with a few other monks, they ventured into the wilds to found the Lodge at Citeaux that would become the HQ of the Cistercian Order of ‘white monks’.

Stephen wrote the constitution for the order, the ‘Carta Caritatis,’ – Charter of Charity, that defined the aspirations and spirit of the pioneers, particularly in its absolute determination to live in community according to the values of Benedict, which had become frayed at the edges, to say the least, through lay patronage and consequent interference: it was not until Stephen’s abbacy that the second Duke of Burgundy, who was a good friend of the abbey, was restrained from holding his court in the monastery on festive occasions. He also avoided society by refusing to conduct funerals in the monastery; and by declining to build schools, or collect relics in order to avoid the danger of idolatry.

Stephen it was, too, who came to understand that the monks would be unable to maintain their avoidance of worldly, feudal – connections and responsibilities without the practical assistance of ‘bearded men’ [lay brothers, rather than child oblates] to undertake the day-to-day work of the abbey freeing the monks to pursue their work in the choir, at prayer and Lectio, and manual labour in the fields.

Under Stephen’s abbacy many daughter houses were founded and he set up an administrative routine by which the Superior would visit all of them each year, and that a council of all abbots would meet once a year to discuss developments and help the order as a whole to adhere to its founding principles.

The so-called ‘Little Exord’ – an account of the early history of the Order, states that, whilst the ethos and working of the small monastery had been established according to the wishes of its pioneers, the rule was so harsh that no new recruits could be found, and that it was following deeply felt prayer that at long last Bernard headed up his 30 postulants, and from there onward the story centres on them. They arrived in 1113, and it takes some years for the formation of a monk, although, characteristically, Bernard seems to have gone off and founded Clairvaux earlier than might normally have been expected; and he was such a larger-than-life character that he probably could not easily prevent himself from grabbing the limelight: it was ever thus and it was Stephen who authorised him to found the abbey at Clairvaux.

Here is an account of Stephen’s achievements during his abbacy from 1109 to 1133 when he resigned:

‘… [Alberic’s] successor was a brother by the name of Stephen; an Englishman by nationality who had also come there with the others from Molesme; lover of the rule and of the new place. During his time the brethren together with the abbot forbade the duke of the country or any other lord to keep court at any time in that monastery as they used to do before at the big festivals.

In order that, in the house of God, in which it was their desire to serve God directly day and night, nothing should remain that savoured of pride and superfluity, or that might eventually corrupt poverty, that safeguard of virtues, which they had chosen of their own free will. They resolved not to keep gold or silver crosses but only painted wooden ones; candelabra only of iron; thuribles only of copper or iron; chasubles only of wool or linen without silk, gold or silver weave; albs or amices of linen only, also without silk or gold or silver. They eliminated the use of all kinds of elaborate coverings, copes, dalmatics and tunicles, but they retained silver chalices, not golden – when it could be done, gold plated, as well as the communion tube of silver, gold plated if possible; stoles and maniples of silk only, without gold or silver. They also ordered that the altar cloths be made of linen, and without embroidery, and that the cruets should have nothing in gold or silver upon them.

In those days the monastery increased in its possessions and land, vineyards, meadows and farm houses; they did not decrease, however, in monastic discipline and therefore God visited their place at this time in pouring out his widest mercy over them’ for they prayed, cried and wept before him day and night, groaning long and deep, and had almost come to the brink of despair because they had no successors …’

And then we come to St Bernard!

The editor of the Penguin ’Cistercian World’ writes:

‘The final form of the Cistercian monastic family owes much more to his [Stephen’s] influence than to Robert or Alberic. Stephen was probably the author of the original draft of ‘Exordium Cisterciensis’ and the ‘Carta Caritatis,’ the latter extremely influential in the constitution of many monastic congregations ... Its purpose was to safeguard permanently the original spirit and observance of Citeaux. This also had been fostered by the rejection of all sources of luxury for personal and liturgical use and of feudal sources of income such as mills, fairs and serfs; from proprietary churches, tithes and rights to customary church offerings from the community. Lay brothers who came to live largely in the grange exploited the lands of the monasteries which were grouped together as far as possible near the monastery in large contiguous areas. The choir monks devoted themselves to public and private prayer Lectio Divina and manual work according to the letter of the Rule of St Benedict … Artistic work was discouraged later but the Citeaux Bible, regarded as the work of Stephen himself showed marked affinities with contemporary English work. This is only one survival of the many illuminated manuscripts from the Citeaux Scriptorium in Stephen’s time.’

It was Stephen, too, who compiled the Citeaux Bible from the various books at the monastery’s disposal, and a prologue explains the trouble he went to in order to refine the best translations available.

The Oxford Dictionary remarks that by the time of Stephen’s death in 1134 and with foundations in France and England such as Waverly, Rievaulx and Fountains, he had lived long enough to see the future of the Cistercian Order assured.

 If the church has it in mind to dump any more of their ‘saints’ there are one or two candidates who would surely take priority over Stephen Harding, who seems to have had a very raw deal from both history, the Roman Church and his own Cistercian Order.