

# An Ardour of Devotion: The Spiritual Legacy of Henry Martyn

*by Brian Stanley*

Amidst all the discords which agitate the Church of England, her sons are unanimous in extolling the name of Henry Martyn. And with reason; for it is in fact the one heroic name which adorns her annals from the days of Elizabeth to our own. Her apostolic men, the Wesleys and Elliots [*sic*] and Brainerds of other times, either quitted, or were cast out of her communion. Her *Acta Sanctorum* may be read from end to end with a dry eye and an unquickened pulse. Henry Martyn, the learned and the holy, translating the Scriptures in his solitary bungalow at Dinapore, or preaching to a congregation of five hundred beggars, or refuting the Mahomedan doctors at Shiraz, is the bright exception.[1]

That sweeping verdict was delivered in 1844, at the height of the ecclesiastical tumult created by the Oxford Movement, by James Stephen, Under-Secretary of State at the Colonial Office, later Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Cambridge, and one of the most notable sons of the Clapham Sect. In Stephen's reckoning, heroism had been in decidedly short supply in the Church of England, but Henry Martyn had single-handedly made up much of the deficit through an exemplary spiritual ardour which was admired by Tractarian and evangelical alike. In three places in this famous essay on the Clapham Sect, Stephen applies the word 'ardour' to Martyn: at Shiraz in Persia he is said to have laboured for twelve months 'with the ardour of a man, who, distinctly perceiving the near approach of death, feared lest it should intercept the great work for which alone he desired to live'; Martyn's character is described, inter alia, as that of 'a man born to love with ardour and to hate with vehemence'; and, most colourful of all, Martyn's spirituality is portrayed in the following hyperbolic terms: 'Insatiable in the thirst for freedom, holiness, and peace, he maintained an ardour of devotion which might have passed for an erotic delirium, when contrasted with the Sadducean frigidity of other worshippers.'[2] One does not have to read very far in nineteenth-century Anglican ecclesiastical history without coming across

evidence of what can only be described as the 'cult' of Henry Martyn. The central motif of that cult is one of Martyn as the ideal embodiment of self-sacrificing missionary ardour. It is a cult which has left its mark on Victorian literature: the forbiddingly pious figure of St John Rivers in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) is almost certainly modelled on Martyn.[3] Much less well known, and deservedly so, is the second-rate novel by the romantic novelist, Harriet Parr (1828-1900), writing under the pseudonym Holme Lee. Her *Title of Honour* (1871) tells the heart-rending story of the doomed romance between the Revd Francis Gwynne (alias Henry Martyn) and Miss Eleanour Trevelyan (alias Lydia Grenfell). The novel adheres slavishly to historical accuracy and ends with the hero's solitary death in 'Tocat'. [4] The cult continues to flourish into the late Victorian period, as is evidenced by the seemingly automatic decision in 1887 to name the hall erected next to Holy Trinity Church to provide a meeting place for university associations in support of foreign missions 'the Henry Martyn Memorial Hall'. Two sermons were preached in Cambridge to mark the opening of the Hall in October 1887. Neither was by a recognized member of the evangelical party, though both preachers were known for their decided Protestant sympathies. The first, preached as a University sermon in Great St Mary's Church on Sunday 16th, was by Dr Charles John Vaughan, Dean of Llandaff and Master of the Temple. Vaughan referred to Martyn's story as 'the hero-life of my boyhood' (Vaughan's father, Edward Thomas Vaughan, was a leading evangelical clergyman and near-contemporary of Martyn at Cambridge). [5]

The second sermon, preached in Holy Trinity Church on the following evening, was by Henry Montagu Butler, the Master of Trinity College, and Vaughan's successor as headmaster of Harrow School from 1859 to 1885. [6] Butler cited the same passage from James Stephen with which I began, and went on to consider why Martyn's life was so worthy of remembrance. His answer, in time-worn homiletical fashion, had three points. First, asserted Butler, Martyn was 'not the greatest Clerical Missionary of the Church of England, but he was the first'. Although John Wesley and George Whitefield 'made attempts at missionary work in America', Martyn was, Butler assured his congregation, 'the first clergyman of the Church of England - at

least since the Reformation' to devote his life to 'gathering together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad'.<sup>[7]</sup> In point of fact, Martyn was *not* the first Anglican clerical missionary; he was, approximately, the 411th. In the course of the eighteenth century, 410 ordained missionaries served the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, mostly in North America and the Caribbean, all of them missionaries of the Church of England, though not all were English.<sup>[8]</sup> It is true that most of them had the primary responsibility of ministering to British persons in the colonies; their evangelistic duties towards the indigenous inhabitants were secondary to their role as colonial chaplains. But precisely the same, of course, was true of Henry Martyn, whose official duties as a chaplain of the Honourable East India Company were strictly confined to ministry to the Company's officials, British soldiers, and their families. By the 1880s, when British missionary horizons were firmly fixed on Africa and the Orient, earlier generations of Anglican missionaries who had crossed the Atlantic to the then heathen Americas seemed not to count. What stuck in the memory was the extraordinary difficulty faced by the Church Missionary Society in its early years in finding any Anglican clergyman willing to sacrifice prospects and possibly life on the foreign field: the first ordained Anglican to be sent out by the CMS was William Greenwood, who was appointed to North India in 1815, nearly three years after Martyn's death.<sup>[9]</sup> Martyn, though never formally a missionary, appeared in retrospect to be the pioneer, the one whose self-immolation on the altar had ignited the flame of the evangelical Anglican missionary devotion which the Henry Martyn Hall had been erected to nourish at its original Cambridge source. Butler's second and third points are less susceptible to challenge. Martyn was, in the second place, a man of 'rare holiness', one, who in Thomas Thomason's famous words penned from Calcutta to Charles Simeon, 'shines in all the dignity of love, and seems to carry about him such a heavenly majesty, as impresses the mind beyond [all] description'.<sup>[10]</sup> Third, there was the legacy of Martyn's work during the seven years of his Company chaplaincy. This was to be measured, not so much in numbers of Indian converts won through preaching, where the harvest was meagre. Indeed, commented Butler with some discernment, 'perhaps, though it would have

grieved him to think so, he was less fitted for this special function of winning, of attracting souls to Christ'. Rather, Martyn's achievement must be assessed in terms of his translation work. The sedentary labour involved in his translations of the New Testament into Hindustani (Urdu) and Persian - Butler makes no reference to that into Arabic which Martyn supervised - was 'not what he had thought of when he left Cambridge', but this reorientation of his missionary commission was accepted, 'even with ardour', as part of the divine will. [11]

Butler's sermon suggests appropriate lines of inquiry for us in this investigation of Martyn's spiritual legacy. First, when and how did the cult of Henry Martyn develop? Second, what was it about his piety as recorded in his biographies that proved so magnetically attractive to nineteenth-century Christians, and not simply to those of evangelical convictions? Third, how far is it possible to peel away the layers of hagiography and recover something of the 'real' Henry Martyn? How was he regarded by those who met him in North India and Persia, where his missionary years were spent? In answer to the first question, it might plausibly be suggested that Martyn's virtual canonization was largely posthumous. Many of those who secured a lasting place in the pantheon of nineteenth-century missionary heroes did so because they died in harness, most often violently at the hands of the 'natives', or sometimes (as in Martyn's case) pathetically isolated from all European company, finally succumbing to the rigours of a harsh climate. John Williams at Vanuatu in 1839, Allen Gardiner in Tierra del Fuego in 1851, John Coleridge Patteson in the Santa Cruz islands in 1871, David Livingstone at Chitambo's village in 1873, James Hannington in Busoga in 1885, and James Chalmers in Papua New Guinea in 1901, form an apostolic succession of British missionary heroes whose violent or pathetic deaths came to be interpreted, with more or less explicitness, as martyrdoms, and whose lives gained added lustre as a result. It is tempting to see Henry Martyn as the first link in that chain of Protestant missionary martyrs. However, none of the classic biographies from John Sargent's famous *Memoir* onwards characterize Martyn *primarily* as a missionary martyr, although occasionally the title of

martyr is given to him: [12]perhaps the obvious homophone of 'Martyn the martyr' was simply too trite to be contemplated.

If we may partially anticipate here the answer to our third question, there is, moreover, evidence that even in his lifetime Martyn was regarded as an individual of prodigious sanctity as well as intellect. This was clearly the case within the Cambridge circle of the disciples of Charles Simeon which nurtured his piety, and remained so when some of those disciples were transplanted to the Indian context. David Brown, the first of the evangelical chaplains in Bengal, said of him at the end of the five months which Martyn spent under his roof in Calcutta in 1806: 'a more heavenly-minded young man I never saw'. [13] This bright and lovely jewel, as Thomason called him, [14] sparkled even more brightly in Calcutta than in Cambridge. Of greater significance, however, is the fact that those from outside the evangelical fold who met Martyn passed specific comment on his sanctity, even if some of them found it a little hard to stomach. Listen, for example, to these extracts from the journal of the utilitarian philosopher and lawyer, Sir James Mackintosh, the Recorder of Bombay, to whom Martyn was introduced on arrival in Bombay from Calcutta in February 1811 by his shipboard companion, Mountstuart Elphinstone. Mackintosh's Christian sympathies were of a distinctly liberal hue, [15] but it seems from the journal entries as if Martyn slowly grew on him:

[February] 24th, Sunday. - Elphinstone introduced me to a young clergyman, called Martyn, come round from Bengal on his way to Bussora, partly for health, and partly to improve his Arabic, as he is translating the Scriptures into that language. He seems to be a mild and benevolent enthusiast - a sort of character with which I am always half in love. We had the novelty of grace before and after dinner, all the company standing.

March 1st. - Mr Martyn, the saint from Calcutta, called here. He is a man of acuteness and learning; his meekness is excessive, and gives a disagreeable impression of effort to conceal the passions of human nature.

[March] 18th, Sunday - 'Padre' Martyn, the saint, dined here in the evening; it was a very considerably more pleasant evening than usual; he is a mild and ingenious man. We had two or three hours' good discussion on grammar and metaphysics [16]

It is possible that by denominating Martyn a 'saint' Mackintosh was merely recognizing his theological affiliation to the 'Saints' of the Clapham Sect, and highly likely that he was writing with his tongue in his cheek. But he does not spell 'saint' with the capital 'S' that was customarily applied to Wilberforce's followers in Parliament: Mackintosh does not appear simply to be identifying Martyn as a member of the evangelical club. The manner of his reference to him suggests rather that by 1811 Martyn was already known in the higher echelons of East India Company society for his conspicuous sanctity, even if that sanctity evoked a wide range of reactions. His sainthood was not merely posthumous.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that, to put it crudely, Martyn died at, or very nearly at, the right moment. James Stephen, sensitive as he was to the political dimensions of missionary affairs, noted that news of his death reached England in 1813 during the parliamentary debates on the renewal of the East India Company's charter.[17]The same issue of the *Missionary Register* in April 1813 which contained Martyn's obituary also printed the text of petitions from all the British missionary societies urging that the charter be revised to make provision for the protection or support of Christian missionaries in the Company's territories, and also reports of public meetings in major cities convened for the same purpose.[18]However, the reports of Martyn's death came too late to have an impact on the petitions themselves. They were not too late to influence the debates in the House of Commons over the 'pious clause' which made provision for persons seeking to introduce 'useful knowledge' and 'religious and moral improvement' in British India, but the absence of reference to Martyn by William Wilberforce and other speakers in those debates suggests that his death made little direct contribution to the outcome, even though there is retrospective evidence that Charles Grant and his supporters used Martyn's career as an argument in favour of amending the charter to ensure that Britain did her religious duty to India.[19]It is at least clear that the solemn news from Armenia combined with the fervour induced by the charter campaign to raise British Christian enthusiasm for the evangelization of India to a new peak in the years following 1813. That fervour helps to explain the extraordinary success of John Sargent's *Memoir of the*

*Rev. Henry Martyn, B.D.*, which first appeared in 1819 and went through twelve British editions by 1835. Sargent's adulatory biography, which contains substantial but carefully selected extracts from Martyn's journals, did a great deal to establish the cult of Henry Martyn. A copy of Sargent's work in Keighley public library was probably the source of Charlotte Brontë's portrait of St John Rivers.[20] More copious and significantly more revealing extracts from the journals appeared in Samuel Wilberforce's two-volume edition of Martyn's *Journals and Letters*, published in 1837, but Wilberforce's work, though well received, appears not to have had the same popular impact, perhaps because it was not sufficiently distinct in content from the existing biography; certainly Wilberforce's book is far rarer today than Sargent's *Memoir* in one of its many editions.[21]

We turn, second, to the question of what were the ingredients of Martyn's piety that proved so compelling to the readers of his life-story in the nineteenth century. The simplest answer is that Martyn is portrayed as having pursued the ideal of holiness with a single-minded intensity that all evangelicals admired but few could match. In the age of seriousness, he appeared to be the serious Christian *par excellence*. The pursuit of holiness brooked no half-measures. As his schoolmate at Truro Grammar School and Cambridge contemporary, Clement Carlyon, put it, 'Martyn was never an idle man, and his misfortune, if it be right to use such a term in his case, seems to have consisted in his not knowing how to realize a middle course - that happy mean which it is, indeed, so difficult to attain.'[22] Martyn had no time for the happy mean, and most Anglicans loved him for it. Nineteenth-century evangelicals have acquired a certain notoriety in some circles for their suspicion that anything pleasurable is likely to be sinful: Leslie Stephen, for example, said of his father, James, that 'he once smoked a cigar and found it so delicious that he never smoked again'.[23] Martyn's life shows something of the same attitude, but on a plane that transcends triviality and bears most obvious comparison with the Catholic saints and mystics. Consider, for example, this extract from Martyn's journal for 17 February 1804, when he was serving as curate at Lolworth:

A despicable indulgence in lying in bed this morning gave me such a view of the dangerous softness of my own character, that I resolved on my knees, to live a life of far more self-denial than I had ever yet done, and to begin with little things. Accordingly, I ate my breakfast standing at a distance from the fire, and stood reading at the window during the morning, though the thermometer stood at the freezing point. I was so cold that I did not get on much in my work of sermon; but the effect on the flow of my thoughts was very surprising, the tone and vigour of my mind rose rapidly.[24]

For Martyn, however, self-denial was desirable not as an end in itself but as a function of his consuming passion for obedience to the will of God. Once the missionary direction of that divine will for his life had become plain to Martyn, as it had by the end of 1802, his life-story combines the central evangelical dynamic of a concern to proclaim the gospel to those who have never heard it with the Catholic ascetical motif of rigorous denial of the flesh and all worldly comforts. That combination is the key to the unique attraction which he exerted on the generation of evangelical Anglicans whose theology evolved and mutated in the years between his death and the Oxford Movement of the 1830s and 1840s. As the evangelical party in the Church of England grew steadily more numerous and politically influential, it also became more prepared to compromise with the ways of the world, more closely absorbed with the instrumentality of a myriad of different societies set up to evangelise the nations and transform the moral fabric of industrial Britain, and gradually less concerned with the essentials of Christian holiness. Martyn's life stood as a beacon of what evangelicals once were and of what they still aspired to be. The young (and still evangelical) John Henry Newman, for example, began reading Sargent's life of Martyn in May 1823 and found it both 'improving' and humbling. In conversations with his friend, E. B. Pusey, over the next few months, Newman discussed whether he possessed the requisite qualities for the missionary office, 'the highest privilege from God I can possess', and shared with Pusey his intention to 'pray to God to make me a missionary'. In Pusey himself Newman saw an 'active, devoted spirit', but prayed 'God grant he may not, like Martyn, "burn as phosphorus"'. [25]

Martyn's spiritual disciplines of self-denial and scrupulous self-examination burnt with a consuming intensity that gave even Newman some concern, but



they exhibited characteristics which were to become central motifs in the ascetic spirituality of the Oxford Movement. Perhaps the most prominent note struck by Sargent's *Memoir* is Martyn's devotion to prayer: 'I felt the need of setting apart a day for the restoration of my soul by solemn prayer', runs a journal entry for 1804: '... I was engaged in prayer in the manner I like, *deep seriousness*.[26] Before his departure for India, Martyn's prayers were the arena in which the imaginative contest between devotedness to God and the manifold attractions - both carnal and spiritual - of remaining in England was played out, and the contest is frequently described in graphic detail:

Riding home from Lolworth, I was enabled to be in prayer much of the time. I was labouring to feel an entire indifference to all created comforts, even to be contented without the ordinances. I wanted to feel myself as having nothing on earth to do but to work for God, and as having to expect no comfort but communion with God. I endeavoured to realize my future life as a missionary, to ask whether I could be satisfied at resigning for ever all pleasing society, to roam about a desert looking for people to preach to, and to wait upon them, patiently enduring their scorn and ill treatment. My heart did not at all shrink from it, but on the contrary, improved and embraced it. It has been in general a blessed day.[27]

Carlyon wrote in his recollections of Martyn that 'it may almost be said that Martyn stuck literally to the text, "pray without ceasing"'. [28] Carlyon thought Martyn prayed too much, particularly on the long voyage to India, when godless and scoffing shipmates would have benefited far more from good ordinary conversation that followed the scriptural injunction to be all things to all men so as thereby to gain some.

Quite frequently Martyn's journal conjoins prayer and fasting. [29] How widespread the practice of fasting was among evangelical Anglicans of that era is an intriguing question, but there is no doubt that Martyn's regular practice of fasting was one of the features that made his life so attractive to a later generation of Anglicans of more Catholic inclinations. Samuel Wilberforce, editing Martyn's journals in 1835, found his observance of fasting convicting. Wilberforce's diary for Good Friday that year records that he read Pusey's tract on 'The Benefits of the System of Fasting', No. 18 in the *Tracts for the Times*, and was persuaded by it of the value of fasting for the

realization of unseen things, prayer, and the subduing of the body to the spirit, and continues:

I have also been brought to this conclusion both by seeing in my dearest father's journals his difficulties on this very point, when he set himself to serve GOD in earnest, and comparing it with the mortified and unselfindulgent life he led afterwards; and also by Mr Martyn's experience recorded in his journals on the same point. I have, therefore, determined with God's help to make a conscience of observing the fasts of the Church.[30]

For the Tractarians and their sympathizers, however, perhaps the most moving aspect of self-denial recorded in Martyn's journals was his wrestling with the apparent call of God to a life of celibacy. Sargent's Memoir, however, says rather little on the subject, apparently seeing Martyn's romantic entanglement as potentially injurious to his reputation for sanctity. Readers of Catholic sympathies would have picked up some hints of the theme from Sargent's biography, but for its full significance in Martyn's spiritual pilgrimage they had to wait for Wilberforce's edition of the journals, which cites the relevant passages at length. Wilberforce's extracts show how Martyn regarded his passionate love for Lydia Grenfell from its first flowering in 1804 as standing in stark opposition 'to my devotedness to God in the missionary way'. [31] Wilberforce records that Martyn attended a meeting of the Eclectic Society on 3 June 1805 at which Richard Cecil warned him that he 'should be acting like a madman, if he went out unmarried'. Martyn spent the rest of the evening in much perplexity on the subject. The examples of his missionary heroes, David Brainerd and C. F. Schwartz, and of the apostle Paul himself, all pointed to the merits of celibacy, but the thought of being without female company 'in a scene and climate of such temptation' as India was sobering. 'But yet', writes Martyn, 'voluntary celibacy seems so much more noble and glorious, and so much more beneficial in the way of example'. [32] Confessing himself 'utterly at a loss to know what is best for the interests of the Gospel', he wrote to Charles Simeon seeking the spiritual direction of his father in God, and waited on tenterhooks for the reply, 'hoping of course that the will of God would coincide with my will, yet thinking that the determination of the question would be indifferent to me.' [33] On this matter, Martyn had chosen the wrong

spiritual director. Simeon, apparently influenced by the example of the early Cambridge evangelical, John Berridge of Everton, had formed a determination to remain single for the sake of the gospel,[34] and his reply to Martyn made clear that in Simeon's view, he should do the same. Martyn's journal entry on reading his letter is one of the most poignant and revealing of all those that survive in Wilberforce's edition:

When the letter arrived, I was immediately convinced beyond all doubt, of the expediency of celibacy. But my wish did not follow my judgment quite so readily. Mr Pratt coming in, argued strongly on the other side, but there was nothing of any weight. The subject so occupied my thoughts, that I could attend to nothing else ... My heart was ready to break with agony, at being torn from its dearest idol, and at other times I was visited by a few moments of sublime and enraptured joy. Such is the conflict: why have my friends mentioned this subject? It has torn open old wounds, and I am again bleeding.[35]

The oscillation between transparent self-deception ('immediately convinced beyond all doubt', and 'nothing of any weight') and painfully honest self-diagnosis is entirely characteristic. It points towards the key to Martyn's fascination: for those keenly aware of the weakness of the flesh, the evidence of self-deception was (and is) reassuring, for it revealed the unmistakable human fallibility of a person whose piety at times teetered on the brink of priggishness; yet the accurate diagnosis of the pain within his soul appeared to confirm the rare depth of his spirituality.

The inner conflicts over Lydia continued after Martyn's departure for India. David Brown had from the outset urged Martyn to come out as a married man, and continued after his arrival in Bengal in May 1806 to recommend that he send for Lydia. By 14 July Martyn is well-nigh persuaded: 'Mr B's arguments appear so strong, that my mind is almost made up to send for Lydia. I could scarcely have any reasonable doubts remaining, that her presence would most abundantly promote the ends of the mission.'[36] But still Martyn vacillates, this time under the

influence of his reading in Catholic missionary history: his journal for 22 July reads:

I passed the latter part of the day in the house, reading the life of Francis Xavier. I was exceedingly roused at the astonishing example of that great saint, and began to consider, whether it was not my duty to live, as he did, in voluntary poverty and celibacy. I was not easy till I had determined to follow the same course, when I should perceive that the kingdom of God would be more advanced by it.[37]

Yet the journal for the very next day records: 'Wrote out a letter for Lydia, but am not yet determined to send it'. The letter, which was finally sent on 30 July, requested her to come and join him as his wife.[38] Lydia, of course, never came. There is evidence, published only in the 1880s, that by 1809 Martyn had accepted that Lydia would never be his, even though he did not entirely rule out marrying some other person: he wrote to his cousin (who was also Lydia's brother-in-law) in October 1809 confessing that 'after one disappointment I am not likely to try again, and if I do I will give her [Lydia] the earliest intelligence of it, with the same frankness with which I have always dealt (with her).'[39] Even if Martyn never arrived at a fixed resolution to remain celibate, his example of forgoing marriage for the sake of Christ undoubtedly inspired some of his more Catholic successors, including probably Newman himself, to view celibacy as an integral part of Christian devotion at its most complete.[40]

We should take note also of Martyn's question of whether he was called to a life of voluntary poverty as well as celibacy. As a chaplain of the East India Company Martyn lived in moderate luxury on what James Stephen termed 'an ugly allowance' of £1200 a year. For Stephen, the generous salary was 'a misfortune, and had been better avoided if possible'.[41] For Martyn, the question of whether to accept appointment as a

Company chaplain, with its ample remuneration, rather than be sent out as a poor missionary by the Church Missionary Society, was part of the dilemma of vocation with which he wrestled in Cambridge during 1804. Charles Grant warned Martyn in January 1804 that missionary life in India would not be cheap (though the terms of his warning are hardly self-consistent): 'it would be absolutely necessary to keep three servants, for three can do no more than the work of one English; that no European constitution can endure being exposed to mid-day heat; that Mr Swartz, who was settled at Tanjore, did do it for a time, walking among the natives.'<sup>[42]</sup>At much the same time, Martyn received news that through some malpractice he had lost his inheritance from his father, apparently for good.<sup>[43]</sup>He had an unmarried sister to support, and his original intention of going to India as a CMS missionary no longer seemed feasible. Martyn's first reaction to the information that as a Company chaplain he would be earning £1200 a year was fear that he 'would be in danger of worldly-mindedness. At present I feel no desire after the riches of the world'.<sup>[44]</sup>Nevertheless, he accepted the Company appointment, which was eventually confirmed on 24 April 1805, as the only means whereby his missionary vocation could be fulfilled. This evangelical saint reluctantly adopted, not the path of voluntary poverty, but that of voluntary riches, for the sake of the gospel, but it seems never had an entirely easy conscience about the lifestyle of palanquins and servants that came with his position.

We turn to our third and final question. How far is it possible to draw apart the hagiographic veil with which nineteenth-century Christians cloaked Martyn and discover something of his personality and the impact it made, both on Europeans and the Muslims of north India and Persia who met him between 1806 and 1812? It is not difficult to find criticism of Martyn, even from

some who deeply admired him. Newman, for example, was prompted by his reading in 1828 of the journal of another missionary pioneer in India, Bishop Heber, to reflect in a letter to John Keble that Heber was superior to Martyn in what would now be called cultural adaptability: '... most pious men who have gone out in ecclesiastical capacity to foreign countries ... have hardly had that flexibility and elasticity of religious principle which can accommodate itself to this world, but from one cause or other have worked stiffly - H. Martyn, in spite of the romantic interest attending him, is (is he not?) an instance.'<sup>[45]</sup>Newman, of course, did not know Martyn personally, but Clement Carlyon did, though only in the English context. Carlyon's chapter on Martyn in his autobiographical reflections repeatedly draws the same comparison as did Newman between Martyn's 'stiffness' and Heber's congeniality as revealed in their respective journals. Heber was by far 'of a happier temperament', and able to recognize how much good was to be done 'by a judicious conformity with the usages of the world around him'. In Martyn's life, on the other hand, 'occasions constantly present themselves which excite regret that the earnest zeal of so good a man was not always tempered with that gentleness of manner which, without compromising the truth, found a way for Bishop Heber to every heart'. Both men, judged Carlyon, were entitled to 'the glorious appellation of saints', but Martyn, unlike Heber, was a saint who was 'naturally prone to overlook our Saviour's injunction to "combine the wisdom of the serpent with the innocency of the dove".'<sup>[46]</sup>

Yet how much weight should be placed on such verdicts is debatable. There is no doubt that Martyn had a propensity to make himself unpopular among some sectors of European society in India, not least because he made no secret of the fact that he found their sins almost as painful to behold as his

own.[47] J. W. Kaye's history of Christianity in India records that his first public sermon in Bengal, delivered at the New Church in Calcutta, 'not only gave offence to his congregation, but drew down upon himself the enmity of some of his brother-chaplains'. His doctrines 'did not consort with their notions, so they preached at and against him. They pronounced his discourse a rhapsody - a mystery; said that he would drive men to despair, destroy their hopes of salvation, and speedily empty the church.'[48] Antipathy to Martyn's uncompromising evangelicalism was thus evident in the reactions he aroused, but this is not the whole explanation. According to Kaye, that other notable Cambridge ecclesiastical export to India, Daniel Corrie, who was no less of an evangelical, 'could find hearers' among the British soldiery, 'where Martyn could find none ... he abounded in what Martyn most wanted, the tact to conciliate and the cordiality to attract'.[49]

It is tempting to conclude from such writers as Kaye and Carlyon that Martyn was a religious bigot, a holy bigot to be sure, but a bigot nonetheless. But first-hand contemporary evidence from India paints a rather different picture. We have mentioned that Martyn's voyage from Calcutta to Bombay in 1811 was made in the company of the prominent East India Company official, Mountstuart Elphinstone, who was proceeding to take up the position of Company Resident at Poona. Elphinstone found Martyn to be 'a far better companion than I reckoned on, though my expectations were high. His zeal is unabated, but it is not troublesome, and he does not press disputes and investigate creeds.' Elphinstone was impressed by Martyn's exceptional abilities as a linguist and mathematician, but even more by his 'good sense', simplicity of manners and character, and cheerfulness of conversation. 'We have in Mr Martyn', he wrote home to a friend, 'one of the mildest, cheerfulest [sic], and

pleasantest men I ever saw'. Martyn was able to talk on 'all subjects, sacred and profane, and laughs and makes others laugh as heartily as he could do if he were an infidel.' He was in fact 'disposed to join in every sort of innocent mirth'.[50]

George Smith, author of the largest of Martyn's biographies, published in 1892, cites most of Elphinstone's commendation and then makes the shrewd observation: 'He who, in the close intimacy of shipboard life in the tropics, could win that eulogy from a critic so lofty and so experienced, must have been at once more human and more perfect than his secret *Journal*, taken alone, has led its readers to believe possible'.[51] Martyn's journal, whose intense and severe introspection was responsible for much of the adulation lavished on him by mid-nineteenth-century admirers, may in fact be a misleading indication of the man as he appeared to his contemporaries. It was, after all, written in conformity to a Puritan genre of private spiritual journals kept for the rigorous benefit of one's own soul; they were a Protestant variant of the confessional, and were never intended for public consumption.[52] Martyn records that his object in keeping a journal was 'to accustom myself to self-examination, to give my experience a visible form, so as to leave an impression on the memory, and so to improve my soul in holiness'.[53] Constance Padwick, with this statement in mind, warned in her biography of Martyn that reliance on the journal as a source presented the danger that 'we know our Martyn chiefly as the great penitent' and fail to discern the lighter dimensions of his personality.[54]

The same quality of cheerfulness that so impressed Elphinstone about Martyn also struck Sir John Malcolm, the British soldier and envoy to Persia to whom (with Sir James Mackintosh) Elphinstone introduced Martyn on their arrival in Bombay. Malcolm in his turn wrote a letter of recommendation for Martyn



to Sir Gore Ouseley, the British ambassador at Tabriz. Martyn, he asserted, had a knowledge of Arabic 'superior to that of any of any Englishman in India. He is altogether a very learned and cheerful man, but a great enthusiast in his holy calling.' Malcolm assured Ouseley that Martyn had 'no thought of preaching to the Persians, or of entering into any theological controversies', which would have undermined the current British objective of establishing a treaty with Iran. He had told Martyn that Ouseley would 'not allow his zeal to run away with him'. Nevertheless, he was confident that Ouseley would be pleased with him: 'He will give you grace before and after dinner, and admonish such of your party as take the Lord's name in vain; but his good sense and great learning will delight you, whilst his constant cheerfulness will add to the hilarity of your party.'<sup>[55]</sup>Ouseley was indeed pleased with him, for it was Ouseley who after Martyn's death secured the safe transmission of his Persian New Testament to St Petersburg, where it was published under Ouseley's supervision in 1815.

European observers of like educational attainment but no particular piety could thus find Martyn to be a much more attractive and indeed hilarious person than the introspective zealot who emerges from the pages of his journal and hence also from most biographies. The biographer of John Malcolm, who recorded his subject's favourable impression of Martyn, was J. W. Kaye, the same author who deemed Martyn markedly inferior to Corrie in his ability to preach to the Company's troops. Perhaps aware of the implicit contradictions in his portrait of Martyn, Kaye summed up the man in the following paradoxical terms:

A strange, sensitive being - *all nerve* - was this young Cornish priest. Irritable and impulsive, of varying moods, sometimes sanguine and hilarious, at others despairing and dejected, he was wrenched and torn by

gusts of passion which seemed almost to threaten his existence. His health was delicate, and he had overworked himself. He seemed to be always in an extreme state of tension vibrating to the slightest touch. His soul never rested.[56]

But what evidence, if any, survives of how Martyn was regarded by the indigenous inhabitants of India and Persia? The standard European printed sources - and sadly they are almost all we possess - give relatively little clue, for Martyn's sainthood was secured more by the charting of his inner spiritual life than by actual missionary achievement. In a rather unsavoury way, J. W. Kaye again points us in the right direction. Writing of the mendicants who flocked to hear Martyn's preaching in front of his house at Cawnpore (Kanpur) in 1809-10, Kaye betrays the nastiness that after the Indian Rebellion of 1857 crept in to British evaluations of Indians and to an extent also of those who took seriously their capacity to respond intelligently to the Christian message:

They came to receive alms, and he distributed to them. Then they listened to what he said - those naked, squalid heathens - the halt, the maimed, and the blind - they flocked around him and listened. Or they pretended to listen - for what could they do less? And Martyn spoke to them, as one who could not help speaking, as one who felt it would be a sin to be silent. From the full heart gushed forth a torrent of words - not always perhaps with the strictest philological propriety - and, in sooth, only by rare snatches intelligible to his congregation. But the numbers increased, and so did the plaudits: and far be it from me to say that no seed fell upon good ground.[57]

If the mendicants were only *pretending* to listen, and unable to understand more than the odd snatch of what Martyn said, why did they keep coming, and in increasing numbers? This was no sycophantic audience: the evangelical writer of missionary tales, Mrs Sherwood, describing the same series of addresses, records the utterance of 'low murmurs and curses', 'hissings and

fierce cries'.[55] Nevertheless, Martyn was evidently capable of exerting a hold of some kind on the beggars of Cawnpore, for George Smith notes that 'When Mr Martyn collected these people he was most carefully watched by the British authorities'.[58] Part of the key to Martyn's attraction to Indian audiences, whether poor or learned, is suggested by an even earlier historian of Indian Christianity, James Hough, another of Charles Simeon's protégés who followed Martyn into the Company's chaplaincy service. Hough's account (dating from 1845) describes Martyn's five weeks in Bombay in 1811, when he had repeated conversations with a Zoroastrian named Feeroz, 'the most intelligent Parsee in the place', and a young and learned Muslim, Mahomed Jan, who was no less zealous in defending the tenets of the Qur'an. Hough records that, though such interlocutors did not yield to his arguments, 'yet they all looked up to him with respect as a man of extraordinary learning and piety'.[59]

As a dying man, Martyn appears to have made a similar but still deeper impression on the Sufi scholars of Shiraz, with whom he found himself in protracted religious debate, much against his better judgment, during the eleven months from June 1811 to May 1812. Martyn soon reached the conclusion that there was no hope of convincing Muslims of the truth of Christian doctrine by the power of rational argument alone. He relied increasingly upon prayer for the blessing of the Holy Spirit on all his scriptural logic. 'I do use the means in a certain way,' he wrote to Lydia Grenfell on 8 September 1811, 'but frigid reasoning with men of perverse minds, seldom brings men to Christ. However, as they require it, I reason, and accordingly challenged them to prove the divine mission of their prophet. ... With very little hope that any good will come of it, I am now employed in drawing out the evidences of the truth; but oh, that I could converse and reason,

and plead, with power from on high. How powerless are the best-directed arguments, till the Holy Ghost renders them effectual.[60] Like many another nineteenth-century missionary after him, Martyn was discovering the hard way that rational appeal to the Christian evidences was a barren method of apologetic in an Islamic or Hindu context. Yet, for all the frustration which his scriptural reasoning encountered, as the doctrinal controversies into which he was drawn ran their tortuous course, Martyn's learning, humility, patience, and resignation acquired for him a rare reputation among his opponents: he was increasingly described as *merdi khodai*, a 'man of God', one who was filled with the divine drunkenness.[61] As the inscription on his tomb at Tokat read, 'He will long be remembered in the East, where he was known as a man of God'.[62] This external and non-Christian testimony to the sanctity of Henry Martyn, far more than the inferences which his Christian admirers later drew from his journal, deserves to be given most weight in our assessment of the spiritual legacy of this extraordinary man, whom we commemorate today and throughout this term with deep gratitude to God.

**Notes:**

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i[1] James Stephen, *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography* 2 vols, (London: 1853), II, pp. 338-9. Stephen's essay on 'The Clapham Sect' was first published anonymously as a review article in the *Edinburgh Review*, 161 (July 1844), pp. 251-307.

i[2] *Ibid.*, , pp. 337, 339, 342.

i[3] See Valentine Cunningham, ' "God and nature intended you for a missionary's wife": Mary Hill, Jane Eyre and other

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missionary women in the nineteenth century', in Fiona Bowie, et. al. (eds.), *Women and Missions: Past and Present: anthropological and historical perceptions* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 96-7.

i[4] Holme Lee, *Her Title of Honour* (London, 1871).

i[5] *The Mission Field*, 33 (1888), p. 35. On E. T. Vaughan see Donald M. Lewis (ed.), *The Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography* (Oxford, 1995), II, pp. 1135-6. For C. J. Vaughan's churchmanship see F. D. How, *Six Great Schoolmasters* (London, 1904), p. 162.

i[6] On Butler see J. R. M. Butler, *Henry Montagu Butler: Master of Trinity College Cambridge 1886-1918: A Memoir* (London, 1925). The author describes his father as 'a strong Protestant' (p. 86).

i[7] H. M. Butler, *Henry Martyn: a sermon preached in Trinity Church, Cambridge, October 17th, 1887* (Cambridge, 1887), p. 4.

i[8] D. O'Connor and others, *Three Centuries of Mission: the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel 1701-2000* (London and New York, 2000), pp. 27-8.

i[9] Church Missionary Society, *Register of Missionaries ... and Native Clergy, from 1804 to 1904* (Church Missionary Society, privately printed, n.p., n.d. [1896], p. 5.

i[10] Butler, *Henry Martyn*, pp. 6-7. For the original words of Thomason's eulogy, written on reunion with his Cambridge friend in Calcutta in November 1810, see John Sargent, *The Life*

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*of the Rev. T. T. Thomason, M. A.*, (London: Seeley & Burnside, 1833), p. 183.

i[11] Butler, *Henry Martyn*, p. 7.

i[12] E.g. Clement Carlyon, *Early Years and Late Reflections*, 4 vols (London, 1836-58), III, pp. 20-1. James Hough, *The History of Christianity in India from the Commencement of the Christian Era*, 5 vols (London, 1845-60), IV, p. 90. Sargent, *Life of Thomason*, p. 183.

i[13] James Hough, *The History of Christianity in India from the Commencement of the Christian Era*, 5 vols (London, 1845-60), IV, p. 90.

i[14] Sargent, *Life of Thomason*, p. 183.

i[15] Carlyon, *Early Years*, III, p. 125.

i[16] Robert James Mackintosh (ed.), *Memoirs of the Life of the Right Honourable Sir James Mackintosh*, 2 vols (London, 1835), II, pp. 89, 95.

i[17] Stephen, *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, p. 344.

i[18] *Missionary Register*, I, 4 (April 1813), pp. 107-44.

i[23] George Smith, *Henry Martyn Saint and Scholar: first modern missionary to the Mohammedans 1781-1812* (London, 1892), p. 516n.

i[20] Cunningham, 'God and nature', p. 96.

i[21] Samuel Wilberforce (ed.), *Journals and Letters of the Rev. Henry Martyn, B.D.*, 2 vols (London, 1837).

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i[22] Carlyon, *Early Years*, I, p. 12.

i[23] Lewis (ed.), *Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography*, II, p. 1049.

i[24] Wilberforce (ed.), *Journals and Letters of Henry Martyn*, I, p. 94. This passage is cited in part in John Sargent, *A Memoir of the Rev. Henry Martyn, B.D.*, 12th edn. (London, 1835), p. 59.

i[25] Henry Tristram (ed.), *John Henry Newman: autobiographical writings* (New York, 1957), pp. 191-7.

i[26] Sargent, *Memoir of Martyn*, pp. 60-1.

i[27] Wilberforce (ed.), *Journals and Letters of Henry Martyn*, I, p. 232.

i[28] Carlyon, *Early Years*, I, p. 14.

i[29] E.g. Sargent, *Memoir of Martyn*, pp. 114, 131, 150.

i[30] A. R. Ashwell, *Life of the Right Reverend Samuel Wilberforce, D.D., 2nd edn, 2 vols* (London, 1883), I, p. 83, cited in David Newsome, *The Parting of Friends: the Wilberforces and Henry Manning*, new edn (Grand Rapids, MI, and Leominster, 1993), p. 173. Pusey's Tract on Fasting, Number 18 in the *Tracts for the Times*, was in circulation from January 1834.

i[31] Wilberforce, *Journals and Letters of Henry Martyn*, I, p. 145.

i[32] Wilberforce, *Journals and Letters of Henry Martyn*, I, pp. 259-60.

i[33] Wilberforce, *Journals and Letters of Henry Martyn*, I, pp. 261, 263.

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i[34] William Carus, *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. Charles Simeon, M.A.* (London, 1847), pp. 230-1; Charles Smyth, *Simeon and Church Order* (Cambridge, 1940), pp. 269-70. For Berridge's views on marriage see Lewis (ed.), *Dictionary of Evangelical Biography*, I, pp. 87-8. For Simeon's recommendation of celibacy to missionaries see also John Noble, *A Memoir of the Rev. Robert Turlington Noble* (London, 1867), pp. 45-6.

i[35] Wilberforce, *Journals and Letters of Henry Martyn*, I, pp. 263-4. Martyn refers to Josiah Pratt (1768-1844), secretary of the CMS from 1802.

i[36] Wilberforce, *Journals and Letters of Henry Martyn*, I, p. 468. See also *ibid.*, I, pp. 168, 467.

i[37] Wilberforce, *Journals and Letters of Henry Martyn*, I, p. 470.

i[38] Wilberforce, *Journals and Letters of Henry Martyn*, I, p. 471, 473-8.

i[39] Martyn to Rev. T. M. Hitchins, 10 Oct. 1809, in Henry Martyn Jeffrey, *Two Sets of Unpublished Letters of the Rev. Henry Martyn, B.D., of Truro* (Truro, 1883), p. 57.

i[40] I owe the point about the influence of Martyn's celibacy on Newman to Dr Sheridan Gilley.

i[41] Stephen, *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, p. 339.

i[42] Wilberforce, *Journals and Letters of Henry Martyn*, I, pp. 85-6.



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i[43] Sargent, *Memoir of Martyn*, pp. 54-5; Wilberforce, *Journals and Letters of Henry Martyn, I*, p. 79; John R. C. Martyn, *Henry Martyn (1781-1812): Scholar and Missionary to India and Persia: a biography* (Lewiston, NY; Queenston, Ontario; and Lampeter; 1999), p. 24.

i[44] Wilberforce, *Journals and Letters of Henry Martyn, I*, p. 179.

i[45] Newman to Keble, 31 July 1828, in Ian Ker and Thomas Gornall (eds), *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman vol. II* (Oxford, 1979), p. 86.

i[46] Carlyon, *Early Years and Late Reflections*, III, pp. 20-1, 36-7.

i[47] A. T. Embree, *Charles Grant and British Rule in India* (London, 1962), p. 240.

i[48] John William Kaye, *Christianity in India: an historical narrative* (London, 1869), pp. 190-1.

i[49] Kaye, *Christianity in India*, p. 197.

i[50] T. E. Colebrooke, *Life of the Honourable Mountstuart Elphinstone*, 2 vols (London, 1884), I, pp. 232-3; R. D. Choksey, *Mountstuart Elphinstone: the Indian years 1796-1827* (Bombay, 1971), p. 134.

i[51] Smith, *Henry Martyn*, p. 328.

i[52] See William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*, new edn., (Philadelphia, 1972), pp. 96-100; Owen C. Watkins, *The Puritan Experience* (London, 1972), pp. 18-25.

i[53] Wilberforce, *Journals and Letters of Henry Martyn, I*, p. 52.

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i[54]Constance E. Padwick, *Henry Martyn: Confessor of the Faith* (London, 1923), p. 10; see also pp. 77-8.

i[55]J. W. Kaye, *The Life and Correspondence of Major-General Sir John Malcolm, G. C. B., late envoy to Persia, and Governor of Bombay; from his unpublished letters and journals*, 2 vols (London, 1856), II, pp. 65-6.

i[56] Kaye, *Christianity in India*, p. 187.

i[57] Kaye, *Christianity in India*, p. 199.

i[58]Smith, *Henry Martyn* p. 283.

i[59]Smith, *Henry Martyn*, p. 284.

i[60] Hough, *The History of Christianity in India, IV*, p. 492; see Sargent, *Memoir of Martyn*, pp. 299-301.

i[61] Smith, *Henry Martyn*, pp. 373, 392, cited in Clinton Bennett, 'Henry Martyn', in G. H. Anderson et al. (eds.), *Mission Legacies: Biographical Studies of Leaders of the Modern Missionary Movement* (Maryknoll, NY, 1994), p. 267.

i[62]Smith, *Henry Martyn*, p. 530.