

GEOFFREY F. NUTTALL (1911-2007): PURITAN SCHOLAR

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by

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‘Ah – but that’s not what you said!’: there will be many who, like me, have heard some such remark from Geoffrey Nuttall when, having been challenged on an opinion, we have attempted to explain our point only to be told that, while what we now ventured might make sense, it is not what we had said. If the alacrity with which Geoffrey could interrogate remarks made in conversation was unnerving it was because something was happening to which, by and large, we are unaccustomed: our words were being taken seriously and we were being held to account for them. In such conversations we found ourselves Geoffrey’s companions on a scholarly quest for truth which assumed in us (no matter how little we might deserve it) a commitment and an experience equal to his, and which demanded, in true Puritan fashion, plain dealing between those engaged upon it.

Geoffrey attended not only to what we said, but to what we wrote. A draft of an essay or other piece sent to him for his comment would return dense with uncompromising

observations and detailed annotations on its scope, its argument, its sources (both primary and secondary) and, not least, on its presentation, picking up errors of grammar and (embarrassingly) spelling. Geoffrey read published texts with the same extraordinary attention to the words on the page. Books received from him as loans or as gifts were invariably marked in margins and endpapers (generally in ink – he had no superstitious regard for the book as an object) with corrections to matters of fact, and with damning cross-references to inconsistencies and contradictions in argument. ‘We have all known’, wrote Patrick Collinson in an eight-fifth birthday tribute, ‘what a dreadful thing it is for our slipshod scholarship to fall into the hands of the living Nuttall’.¹

This scrupulousness was not scrupulosity, nor Geoffrey’s accuracy pedantry, because he never supposed them ends in themselves. They were rather essential means to track a true path through the mazes of error: getting things straight was the necessary precondition for meaningful debate and reliable representation of the past. Hence his fascination with genealogy, with sorting out relationships, leading to marvellously intricate handwritten family trees extending through generations across the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and often beyond, tracing the interconnections between dissenting families up to the twentieth century, and, indeed, between other relationships: I once received from him a chart of Charles’ II’s mistresses and their progeny.

This determination to understand inter-relationships and sequences extended beyond the biographical and genealogical. No argument could be sound that did not have a secure footing in the historical record. It was to provide that security that Geoffrey

undertook those selfless acts of scholarly dedication that resulted in the calendars of early Quaker letters in the Swarthmore MSS (1952), of the correspondence of Philip Doddridge (1979) and of Richard Baxter (1991).² His patient and scholarly attentiveness through many decades sorting and ordering papers held haphazardly in different collections in a number of archives, often undated, often difficult to read, has unlocked these primary sources and rendered their data accessible to scholars as never before. A similar service is provided by many of Geoffrey's lesser pieces, such as his listings of the later letters of Mercy Doddridge and of James Nayler's extant correspondence,³ his analysis of the extant manuscript portions of the *Reliquiae Baxterianae* and his annotated transcription of Richard Baxter's library catalogue.⁴

Geoffrey's wonderful linguistic skills were a mark of this same determination: how might one know what is being said unless one can access the original tongue? Hebrew, Latin, Greek might perhaps be expected in a Classicist and minister, and possibly French and German in an early modern historian, but when to these are added Italian, Dutch and Welsh the range has become Miltonic in its comprehensiveness. Geoffrey once remarked, in jest but tellingly, that to have it recorded that he had acquired every language he needed for his work was the sort of thing he should like to see on his tombstone.

Geoffrey lived a retired and modest way of life and he was (shamefully) never promoted to the chair or other position of academic eminence that should so clearly have been his. And yet, this was hardly needed, for without the benefit of institutional recognition or formal promotion, his influence reached out far and wide. From Brim Hill, London, and then Queen Mother Court, Birmingham, and finally

from Burcot Grange, Bromsgrove, his networks (a word he would have detested) extended to every continent. His visitors' books - which no one could leave without signing - became a veritable roll-call of twentieth-century scholars, all of whom benefited from his advice, and very many from his friendship, for he had a genius for friendship. Through him one felt oneself part of a community, or congregation, of scholars covenanted, as it were, to serve and support each other.

This was certainly how he conducted himself, very largely through letters. He was the most diligent and conscientious correspondent, writing promptly (he alone seems never to have had to apologise for a delay in replying!) and at length to a great range and diversity of correspondents. These included not only scholars pre-eminent in their profession but also those at an early stage in their careers: to PhD students in whom he detected the heart of the matter he was immediately, and sustainedly, responsive and supportive. As a result, more books published on religious aspects of the history and culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries bear acknowledgements to him and expressions of gratitude for his advice and support than, I conjecture, to any other twentieth-century scholar in the field. By bringing out the best in those who engaged with him he made stronger innumerable publications by other hands, and so, through his influence and advice, immeasurably advantaged early modern historiography in general.

I have been speaking of Geoffrey's interactions with contemporary friends, scholars and their books, but one of the wonderful things about him was that he maintained precisely the same kind of converse with the dead as with the living. Nothing would have seemed stranger to him than to maintain, in the words of the title of a famous

1968 essay by the French literary scholar and theorist Roland Barthes, ‘the death of the author’ or to hold, like Barthes, that an author’s own intentions and meanings in texts are irrecoverable.⁵ No one knew better than Geoffrey how what we now call ‘the circumstances of production’ shaped texts (and he was far more knowledgeable about those circumstances than most who pronounce on them) but he would never for a moment have supposed that in consequence texts are merely circumstantial and cultural artefacts over which their authors exercise no control. On the contrary, his enterprise was precisely to recover the author. For him the records of the past were records of human agency, not intertextual constructs, fictional fabrications, still less evidence only of the interplay of ideological forces or of the determinism of cultural materialism. Geoffrey knew very well that historical records are unreliable, but from that he did not infer that history is bunk; rather, it led him to sift those records with meticulous care convinced that through this careful attentiveness as true an acquaintance was to be made with Richard Baxter, John Bunyan, Oliver Cromwell and George Fox (his ‘big four’, as he used to say, though Philip Doddridge comes a close fifth) as with any contemporary. Persons in their individuality were the inspiration of his historiography, which was hence characteristically prosopographical and biographical in manner, in the tradition, as it were, that originated in the three publications by Edmund Calamy that first recorded nonconformist lives.⁶ Geoffrey was a close great student of these and a great admirer of A. G. Matthews’s *Calamy Revised*,⁷ a work, he wrote in 1965, that ‘has been more often in my hands than almost any other book’.⁸

This particularity was unimpressed by grand abstract historical generalisations.

Geoffrey was interested in social relationships, not in sociology, in the experience of

faith rather than in theology, in communities of believers rather than in ecclesiology. His titles are of persons and of people: *visible saints*, not *congregationalism*, *the holy spirit in Puritan faith and experience*, not *Puritan pneumatology*. In the true Puritan way, *experience* was his focus: the enactment of belief in behaviour and in lives and in communities. Abstractions like *revolution* – that commonest hand-me-down and summary explanation for what was going on in the mid seventeenth century - meant little to him, nor did such vaguely appreciative adjectives as *radical*. Such tags he regarded not merely as lazy, as a substitute for saying what was distinctive about a particular individual, but also as the present's way of imposing upon the past, of patterning it in its own image, rather than attending to what it meant to those for whom it was experientially present.

In this respect, his work differed signally from that of the historian who, more than any other, enjoyed acclaim for his interpretation of the material, and the lives, with which Geoffrey worked. Christopher Hill was certainly sympathetic to that material and to those lives, but on predetermined terms. His enterprise was, as he wrote of his biography of Bunyan, to put his people 'back into the revolutionary age'.⁹ In such formulations, *revolution* was not used in its seventeenth-century sense but in its anachronistic twentieth-century sense.¹⁰ The result generated many striking insights, but it also detected in every life and in every text the same paradigm. Hence, wherever this historical gaze was directed, it discerned the same experiences, commitments and aspirations, modelling even Milton in the image of 'his radical contemporaries', 'Baptists, Levellers, Diggers, Seekers, Behmenists, Socinians, Ranters, Muggletonians, early Quakers and other radical groupings which took part in the free-for-all discussions of the English Revolution'.¹¹ Rather than lump together

groups or persons in an indiscriminate list that implied common purpose and shared experience, Geoffrey's sharply focused articles and essays isolated the distinctive, the idiosyncratic, the individual. It was this quality that he valued in the three contemporary historians whom he most admired: Dom David Knowles, Sir Richard Southern and Professor Patrick Collinson. As he wrote in the preface to the second edition of his *Visible Saints*, his purpose was 'to preserve integrity', to allow those of an earlier generation to 'speak for themselves' and to be 'taken seriously'.¹²

And so, under his hand, a host of past lives recovered their dignity and their integrity – most notably, perhaps, James Nayler, whom Geoffrey showed was not simply mad or bad or both but something quite different, and altogether finer.¹³ This empathy with persons, and with personal predicaments, demanded the imaginative capacity to enter into, and to recreate, past states. This Geoffrey had. Though no one could spot an error more quickly than he, no one was less satisfied with work that is drearily factual: the past must live. He was himself deeply responsive to creative writing, to Virgil, Dante, Dafydd ap Gwilym, Shakespeare, Herbert, Bunyan, the Victorian novelists, Rilke, and many others. It was characteristic of him to begin his lecture on the occasion of the closure of New College, London, with a quotation from Wordsworth; characteristic of him, too, to choose a piece hardly familiar even to Wordsworthians, the sonnet 'On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic'.¹⁴ For all its scholarly rigour – or perhaps because of its scholarly rigour - his own work is full of deftly and imaginatively realised vignettes, lively depictions, characterisations and recreations of persons and of situations, across a wide range of material. Though he undoubtedly recognised the Puritan spirit that was his great theme most readily in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, he responded to the varieties of Christian

witness throughout history, to Erasmus and Dante as well as to Bunyan and Cromwell. In so doing, he deliberately eschewed partisanship, exclaiming in dismay at 'How few will study Church History without some *parti pris!*'.¹⁵ He wrote as sensitively about George Fox as about John Bunyan, though neither would have had a kind word to say for the other.¹⁶ He could edit with Owen Chadwick an ecumenical collection of essays marking the tercentenary of the Great Ejection¹⁷ and he admired the work of the Roman Catholic historian Eamon Duffy whose view of the Reformation is quite at odds with his own.¹⁸ Geoffrey worked, as it were, in the tradition of Baxter's catholicity, and, indeed, of the tolerationist convictions of Independency.

Geoffrey shared with the old Puritans a horror of time wasting and had an indefatigable capacity for hard work. It was characteristic of him, upon notice of its revision, to make his way steadily through the more than sixty volumes of the entire *Dictionary of National Biography* from A to Z, making notes of errors and inconsistencies on cards regularly despatched to ever increasingly astonished editors at Oxford University Press. After the scale of that undertaking, it hardly seems remarkable that, though a sufficiently daunting project, he performed a similar task for the third edition of *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.¹⁹ He was unstinting in his service to ecclesiastical and denominational history societies and their journals, to Dr. Williams's Library (becoming the longest serving of Dr. Williams's trustees), to the Congregational Library and to New College, as its Librarian ensuring through clear-sighted determination that its holdings of older books were not dispersed on the College's closure but transferred to Dr. Williams's Library.²⁰ Above all, though, his industry is evident in his quite extraordinary

productivity. From the 1930s he published in eight successive decades, and, until very recently, he published in every single year of every one of those eight decades, a total output of many hundreds of pieces.²¹

In 1945 Geoffrey was only the second nonconformist to be awarded a D. D. by Oxford University and, at 34, he was one that degree's very youngest recipients. In choosing as the subject for his thesis the understanding and experience of the Holy Spirit across the range of Puritan witness (including the Quakers), he was also one of the boldest claimants on the degree. No one had before then supposed that Puritan tracts, controversies and pamphlets deserved the kind of scholarly attention previously devoted to Reformation theologians, medieval schoolmen and church fathers. This, however, was Geoffrey characteristically taking people seriously, listening to what they said without prejudice. Published in 1946 as *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience*, it became one of the key texts in the twentieth century's rediscovery of the Puritans. It was re-issued in 1992 as still 'perhaps the best single account of English Puritan thought in the later 1640s and the 1650s'.²² It would be very hard to think of another scholarly work that could command republication nearly fifty years after it first appeared, unless, of course, it is Geoffrey's own *Visible Saints*, re-issued in 2001 just short of fifty years after its first publication in 1957.²³ The enduring significance of these and Geoffrey's many other publications was recognised in 1991 with an honour which, of all worldly things, he valued most highly: election to a Fellowship of the British Academy.

When, over many years, I stayed with Geoffrey at Queen Mother Court, it was our habit to begin our day by reading and discussing at breakfast a George Herbert poem, in memory of which, and of so much more, I turn to Herbert to close this tribute:

Vertue²⁴

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,
The bridall of the earth and skie:
The dew shall weep thy fall to night;
For thou must die.

Sweet rose, whose hue angrie and brave
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye:
Thy root is ever in its grave,
And thou must die.

Sweet spring, full of sweet dayes and roses,
A box where sweets compacted lie;
My musick shows ye have your closes,
And thou must die.

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,
Like season'd timber, never gives;
But though the whole world turn to coal,
Then chiefly lives.

NOTES

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- 1 Patrick Collinson, 'Geoffrey Nuttall: Early Modern Historian', *The Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society*, 5 (1996), 511.

 - 2 Geoffrey F. Nuttall (ed.), *Calendar of the Correspondence of Philip Doddridge D.D. (1702-51)* (London: H.M.S.O., 1979); id. (with N. H. Keeble), *Calendar of the Correspondence of Richard Baxter 1615-91*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). 'Early Quaker Letters from the Swarthmore MSS. to 1660: calendared, index and annotated' (1952) was not printed but produced in twenty-five typescripts, of which copies are held in Friends' House Library, London, and in Cambridge University Library.

 - 3 Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Handlist of the Correspondence of Mercy Doddridge 1751-1790* (London: Dr. Williams's Trust, 1984); id., 'The Letters of James Nayler', in M. L. Birkel and J. W. Newman (ed.), *The Lamb's War: Quaker Essays to Honour Hugh Barbour* (Richmond, Indiana: Earlham College Press, 1992), pp. 38-75.

 - 4 Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Manuscript of Reliquiae Baxterianae*, Dr. Williams's Library Occasion Paper no. 1 (London: Dr. Williams's Trust, 1954) and 'The MS, of *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (1696)', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 1 (1950), 73-9; id. 'A Transcript of Richard Baxter's Library Catalogue', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 2 & 3 (1951-2).

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- 5 The essay was later included in Barthes' *Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977) and has subsequently been reprinted in other selections of Barthes' work and of modern essays in literary and cultural theory.
- 6 Edmund Calamy, *An Abridgment of Mr. Baxter's History of his Life and Times. With an Account of Many Others of Those ... who were Ejected or Silenced after the Restauration ... And a Continuation of their History, till the Year 1691* (1702); id., *An Abridgement of Mr. Baxter's History of his Life and Times. With an Account of the Ministers ... Ejected or Silenced after the Restauration ... And a Continuation of their History, to ... 1711*, 2 vols. (1713); id., *A Continuation of the Account of the Ministers ... Ejected and Silenced after the Restauration*, 2 vols. (1727).
- 7 A. G. Matthews, *Calamy Revised: Being a Revision of Edmund Calamy's Account of the Ministers and Others Ejected and Silenced, 1660-2* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934).
- 8 Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Richard Baxter* (London: Nelson, 1965), p. vii.
- 9 Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious and Factious People: John Bunyan and his Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 3.
- 10 In his essay "The Word "Revolution"", however, Hill argued that the word had begun to acquire its modern sense before the middle of the seventeenth century (Christopher Hill, *A nation of Change and*

Novelty: Radical Politics, Religion and Literature in Seventeenth-Century England (1990; rptd. London: Bookmarks, 1993), pp. 100-20.

- 11 Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (1977; rptd. London: Faber, 1979), pp. 4, 5.
- 12 Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Visible Saints: The Congregational Way 1640-1660*, 2nd edn. (Weston Rhyn, Oswestry: Quinta Press, 2001), p. vii.
- 13 Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *James Nayler: a Fresh Approach*, *Journal of the Friends' Historical Society* supplement 26 (London: Friends' Historical Society, 1954).
- 14 Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *New College, London and Its Library: Two Lectures* (London: Dr. Williams's Trust, 1977), p. 5.
- 15 Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1947), p. x.
- 16 See e.g. his introduction to John L. Nickalls (ed.), *The Journal of George Fox* (1952; rptd. London: Religious Society of Friends, 1975), pp. xix-xxxvii, and his essay 'The Heart of *The Pilgrim's Progress*', in P. N. Brooks (ed.), *Reformation Principle and Practice: Essays in Honour of Arthur Geoffrey Dickens* (London: Scolar Press, 1980), pp. 229-39.
- 17 Geoffrey F. Nuttall and Owen Chadwick (ed.), *From Uniformity to Unity 1662-1962* (London: SPCK, 1962).

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- 18 Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400-c.1580* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992).
- 19 F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. vi.
- 20 Geoffrey Nuttall's work in these several respects is outlined in: Ronald Bocking, 'Geoffrey Nuttall: Librarian' and John Creasey, 'Geoffrey Nuttall and Three Libraries', *The Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society*, 5 (1996), 525-9, 529-32; Clyde Binfield, 'Profile: Geoffrey Nuttall - The Formation of an Independent Historian', *Epworth Review*, 25 (1998), 79-106 *passim*.
- 21 Tai Liu has compiled 'A Bibliography of the Writings of Geoffrey F. Nuttall' appended to R. Buick Knox (ed.), *Reformation, Conformity and Dissent: Essays in Honour of Geoffrey F. Nuttall* (London: Epworth Press, 1977), and 'Geoffrey F. Nuttall: a Bibliography 1977-1996', *The Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society*, 5 (1996), 534-43.
- 22 Peter Lake, introduction to Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience*, new edn. (Chicago and London; University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. xxv. Geoffrey Nuttall did not authorise this reprint since he was not notified of the plan to re-issue the work; those involved had supposed him long dead.

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- 23 For publication details, see above, n. 11.
- 24 F. E. Hutchinson (ed.), *The Works of George Herbert* (1941; rptd. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 87.