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THE OXFORD MOVEMENT: STILL INTERESTING AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

C. Brad Faught

The Oxford or Tractarian Movement remains enduring in its fascination for historians largely because of the appeal of its central characters and the importance of its defining issues. The movement's formal inception may have come back in 1833, but its various themes—religion, politics, friendship, to name a few—are timeless. The movement's main leaders—especially John Henry Newman, whose later life as a Roman Catholic would consolidate his position as perhaps the greatest Christian apologist of the 19th century—are major figures in the history of modern Christianity, while its heirs continue to shape Anglican modes of faith and worship today.

The Oxford Movement has generated a long and distinguished historiographical pedigree. From R.W. Church's classic account published in 1891, *The Oxford Movement: Twelve Years, 1833–1845*, to Owen Chadwick's collection of essays published in 1990, *The Spirit of the Oxford Movement*, the story of the men of Oxford's stand against the "spirit of the age" has been told often, and told well. According to the bibliographer Lawrence Crumb, there are some 7,500 essays, reviews, and books on the subject.¹ Therefore, the challenge for the historian whose interests lie in early Victorian British political and religious history—and who wishes to make a significant contribution to what is an enormous body of work—is to look for untried points of entry. One of these, it seemed to me when I first began contemplating writing a book on the Oxford Movement, was to examine it thematically and synthetically. In taking this approach I was indebted to Linda Colley's superb thematic study of the development of "Britishness" in the 18th and 19th centuries, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (1992). As I continued to probe the movement's history—and its historiography—my growing idea that a broad based and thematic study was both necessary and sustainable was borne out by what I found. Nowhere in the corpus of work on the Oxford Movement was there a prolonged attempt to place it squarely within the context of late Regency and early

Victorian society. Having examined the wider impact of the Oxford Movement in five different but interrelated ways—politics, religion and theology, friendship, society, and missions—I contend that it had an identifiable, important, and varied influence on Victorian society. Restricting the movement to its overtly religious features—as most past studies of it had done in one form or another—limits a full understanding of its place in 19th-century British history and in that of the wider English-speaking world.



Cardinal John Henry Newman. © Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS

"A shake to men's minds" is how Wendy Hinde describes Catholic Emancipation, a central issue in British politics in the late 1820s, and of generative—if obviously ironic—importance to the Oxford Movement.² For young and stalwart Church of England Oxford dons such as John Henry Newman, John Keble, Richard Hurrell Froude, and later Edward Bouverie Pusey, Catholic Emancipation posed a real threat to the nature of the Anglican confessional state and would be—as it turned out—a significant

step in what they saw as an attack on the prerogatives of the established church. A few years later in 1833 John Keble, provoked by the Grey Whig government's introduction of the Irish Church Temporalities Bill, preached his later to be famous National Apostasy sermon at the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford. Keble's sermon signaled the formal beginning of the Oxford Movement, and soon Newman and Froude joined him in preaching, writing, and cajoling their clerical colleagues in an attempt to reclaim the Church of England from the slough of erastianism into which they believed it had fallen.

At the outset of the movement, the Tractarians' (as they came to be called in light of their regular publication of the *Tracts for the Times*) fight was essentially political. They despised the Whigs for sponsoring legislation such as the Irish Church Bill, which was designed to economize the cost of the Church of England's operations in Ireland and denounced by the Tractarians as a wholly unjustifiable intervention by the state in the sacred affairs of the church. Over the years that followed the Tractarians laid bare the cardinal features of the British establishment with a view to restoring the church's proper position in the face of a state that had, in their view, gone apostate.

The degree to which the Tractarians' fight was political is something that recent scholarship—such as Peter Nockles' book *The Oxford Movement in Context: Anglican High Churchmanship, 1760–1857* (1994)—has done much to consolidate. Indeed, any other approach, it may be argued, makes it impossible to grasp the underlying motivations of the Tractarians. In this regard, politics—understood as the totality of church-state relations—was of equal importance to the Oxford Movement as its manifest religious and theological features. Motivation and impact are conjoined in the history of the Oxford Movement, which is what makes it so rich and varied. From tracing its political roots—entwined as they are with the internecine politics of Oriel College where all the leading Tractarians were sometime fel-

lows—to the impact of political economy, Romanticism, the rise of Gothic architecture, the resurgence of Anglican women's orders, and participation in the 19th-century missionary imperative, the Oxford Movement repays a broad-based penetration of its history. Each of these areas reveals an engagement with society—even if sometimes an unplanned one—that thrust the Tractarians into the midst of many of the most important issues in Victorian society at home, throughout the British Empire, and in the United States. For this reason, a study of the Tractarian-inspired Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA), for example, throws much light on the pungent party struggles of the Victorian Church of England. In the story of the UMCA's first bishop, Charles Mackenzie, who died a forlorn death on the banks of a remote African river in 1861 while waiting to meet up with David Livingstone, some of the great themes of Victorian Christian missionary sacrifice are played out. At the same time, the UMCA's early years were marked by scandal over its use of violence against Arab slave traders and its sharp intolerance of Evangelical and parachurch missionary bodies.

Elsewhere, such as in the settler societies of the empire and in the U.S., the lines of division between Tractarian sympathizers and adherents of the Broad and Evangelical parties within the Church of England replayed many of the same struggles that had marked the mother country during the early years of the Oxford Movement. The titanic contest between John Strachan, Bishop of Toronto, for instance, and Evangelical Anglicans, Methodists, and others in Upper Canada marked colonial society there for at least two generations and resulted in the firm establishment of the principle of non-denominationalism in the province. Much the same situation prevailed in Australia as well.

At home in Britain, the Tractarians' ability to engender an intense and often angry reaction from both church and governmental opponents did not wane greatly, even after the high-water mark of the movement had been reached in the late 1830s. Through ecclesiastical disputes such as the Gorham Judgment in the 1850s and political ones such as the Public Worship Regulation Act in the 1870s—brought in to curb what were seen to be the excesses of “ritualism” by the government of Benjamin Disraeli, whose early novels showed a clear Tractarian sympathy—the Oxford Movement retained a special capacity to out-

rage English (Protestant) opinion. Not for nothing were the Anglican nuns and assorted church worthies at one of Edward Pusey's first convents bombarded by townspeople with rotten vegetables and plates at its opening.

Even though such big themes as theology, church-state relations, and party politics fuel much of the continuing interest in the Oxford Movement, smaller themes such as fraternity and the late 1820s controversy over the method of tuition at Oriel College are important in gaining a more complete picture of the shared motivational base of the Tractarians. For Newman and Froude, whose friendship intensified in the early 1830s, the Oxford Movement became an all-consuming crusade. Certainly for Froude, whose life was cut short by consumption in 1836, the years from 1833 until his death were ones in which he pushed the movement to become progressively more radical in its apprehension of the catholic nature of the Church of England and how far it had slipped—in his view—from the universal ideal. The full extent of Froude's views was made public only after the posthumous publication of his private journals. Newman and Keble together made the risky decision to publish the journals as the *Remains* in 1838–39, knowing that they would cause a firestorm of protest from Protestant churchmen whose ire was easily roused by various of Froude's statements such as, “the Reformation was a limb badly set—it must be broken again in order to be righted.”

Froude's passing, not long after he had returned to England from Barbados where he had been seeking relief for his ill health, was a body blow for Newman. His friend's death left him feeling utterly bereft. They had shared much during the previous three years especially, including an illuminating journey to the Mediterranean in the spring and early summer of 1833 from which both men returned ready for “a work” in England, as Newman put it. This “work” had been in prospect for some time, and not just because of macropolitical events such as Catholic Emancipation, the Great Reform Act of 1832, and the Irish Church Bill of the following year. Newman and Froude, as Oriel College fellows and tutors, had earlier taken on the provost, Edward Hawkins, and the group of college dons known as the “Noetics” over the issue of private tuition. Newman and Froude were staunch in their belief in the pastoral role of the college tutor, and held that the striving for moral excellence by undergraduates was equal

to, if not more important, than that for intellectual excellence. The Noetics, who prided themselves on intelligence, rationality, and cleverness in debate, thought Newman and Keble both tiresome and wrongheaded on this point. In the battle that ensued—one which the nascent Tractarians eventually lost—some of the themes of the Oxford Movement were rehearsed and, revealingly, personal friendship counted for much.

Close friendships defined the early years of the movement when the *Tracts for the Times* and the *British Critic* were being published. Undergirding the range of topics contained in both publications—the position of the clergy, the Royal Supremacy, the legacy of the High Churchmen, the poor and dispossessed in society, and so on—was a clear fraternal devotion that, in the view of some later commentators and historians, verged on the homoerotic. Indeed, one of the few largely untrodden paths of Tractarian historiography is a thorough and modern assessment of the Oxford Movement and sexuality.

2003 marks the 170th anniversary of the beginning of the Oxford Movement. The power it has to retain the interest of historians, theologians, and others is a testament to the importance of its many themes and to the magnetic literary (and oratorical) power of some of its leaders, especially John Henry Newman. As an event in Victorian history, the Oxford Movement serves to throw into sharp relief various features of the society of which it was an important part. But its longevity as a thing of historical interest and as a demonstration of religion in action no doubt lies in its transcendence; the search for the church's place in the modern world is what greatly animated the Tractarians, and that is a search which continues in earnest in our own day.

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¹ Lawrence N. Crumb, *The Oxford Movement and Its Leaders: A Bibliography of Secondary and Lesser Primary Sources* (Scarecrow Press, 1988). A supplement was published in 1993.

² Wendy Hinde, *Catholic Emancipation: A Shake to Men's Minds* (Blackwell, 1992).