



WILFRED LAWRENCE KNOX

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1886-1950

WILFRED LAWRENCE KNOX was one of the four brilliant sons of Edmund Arbuthnot Knox, sometime Bishop of Manchester and a militant leader of the Evangelical party in the Church of England. The Knoxes traced their descent from Bishop Andrew Knox, a cousin of John Knox the Scottish reformer, through a branch of the family settled at one time in Ulster. Edmund Knox was the son of a chaplain in the service of the East India Company, with which his mother's family also had connexions. He married a daughter of the first Bishop of Lahore, Thomas Valpy French. Bishop French was a remarkable character, of outstanding powers and strong, not to say wayward, individuality, who, after a lifetime of restless movement between poor parishes in England and posts in India, retired from his diocesan charge and died as a free-lance missionary in Muscat. Something of his ascetic unworldliness, as well as his idiosyncratic temperament, may be thought to have reappeared in his grandson.

Wilfred Knox was born in 1886 at his father's vicarage of Kibworth Beauchamp, Leicestershire, the fifth of six children. Five years later the father removed to the parish of Aston, Birmingham. The family seem to have taken the change hardly, and their health suffered. In 1891 Mrs. Knox died. Of the sad years which followed for the children some glimpses are given in the reminiscences of one of the elder daughters, Lady Peck. They were cared for by various relatives, not all of them congenial, or indeed suitable, guardians for the motherless brood, whose early education seems to have been somewhat miscellaneous. However, in 1895 the father married again. The second wife, Ethel Newton, was a woman of great ability and charm, and surely of high courage, who devoted herself to the family, now happily reunited under her wise care. Wilfred and his younger brother Ronald (Monsignor Knox) came home from their grandmother's, 'shy and solemn little boys in horrid black suits fashioned by their grandmother's maid', and, removed from an unnatural existence among elderly relatives, blossomed out under the benign influence of their stepmother.

In due course Wilfred went to Rugby and thence to Trinity College, Oxford. After a First Class in Honour Classical Moderations and in the Final Honour School of Literae Humaniores, he entered the Civil Service and was appointed to a post as Junior Examiner in the Board of Education. He resided meanwhile at the Trinity College Mission in Stratford, of which for a period he acted as Warden. Largely through the influence of William Temple (afterwards Archbishop) he came into touch with the Workers' Educational Association. His interest and sympathy became deeply engaged with the 'down and out' types who surrounded the Mission—an interest which exerted a pull on him for the rest of his life.

His thoughts now turned to the ministry of the Church, and in 1913 he resigned from the Civil Service and went up to St. Anselm's House, Cambridge, to prepare for ordination. He was ordained deacon in 1914, priest in the following year, and served as curate in a London parish for about five years. But he was already being urged by friends to think of theological learning as the field in which his gifts should be employed for the service of the Church. With this in view he returned to Cambridge and took up residence at the newly opened Oratory House. After a year he left the House for a time, reluctantly enough, to go to the help of an Anglo-Catholic friend who was struggling under difficulties in a slum parish in Hoxton. However, in 1924 he was back at the Oratory House, and this time permanently.

The Oratory of the Good Shepherd had been founded in 1913 by a handful of Cambridge chaplains and fellows as 'a society of unmarried priests and laymen of the Anglican Communion . . . to give its members the help of a close fellowship and a common Rule'. After a somewhat chequered history during the war years it acquired in 1920 a house in Lady Margaret Road as a residence in which a nucleus of the fellowship could live together under discipline somewhat after the manner of a religious order, while other members pursued their calling in their colleges, but in close association with the resident group. The Oratory offered its members opportunities for theological study and for various forms of active service, including the pastoral care of undergraduates and others, and it made provision for ordered worship in the 'Catholic' tradition for a wider circle. Among other activities it promoted a mission to fruit pickers in the Long Vacation, in which many undergraduates took part.

Such was the Oratory of the Good Shepherd at the time when Wilfred Knox made it his home on his return to Cambridge in 1924. From that year until the House was closed early in the second war he was its Warden, and from 1941 he was Superior of the Oratory. He threw himself into its way of life with ardour, and partook in most of its activities—though indeed when it fell to him to sing the Service his complete lack of a musical ear obliged him to employ the aid of a ‘vicar choral’.

His life in the Oratory was summed up at the time of his death by the present Dean of King’s: ‘He was greatly beloved of his brethren, who had come, more and more as years went by, to depend on his wisdom and his deep attachment to, and understanding of, the way of life to which the Oratory is committed. There has never been anyone like Father Wilfred, and it is impossible to believe that there ever will be. It would be absurd to regard him as a typical member of the Oratory, or of any other society to which he belonged. Yet, in spite of his highly marked individuality and his singular but endearing eccentricities, there is no doubt that he has done more than anyone else to give the Oratory the stability and cohesion which it at present possesses’.

Another of his close associates in the Oratory (now Dean of York) writes:

In this life, on all four sides, religious, intellectual, recreational, and social, he was utterly and happily at home. Quiet the life may have been. Its happiness certainly was unique. There can never have been, for all its austerities, a merrier little community. How much the Knox wit contributed to this can easily be guessed. . . . If Wilfred was an academic of the purest water, if he was through and through a devoted ‘religious’, he had a social side, which drew young men to him in deep attachment. His love for them was wholly unsentimental but deep. He had learned—if in his case it needed learning—this love for young men in his London parishes; and he exercised it annually among the fruit pickers in the Wisbech district.

He had about him so much of the withdrawn manner of the scholar and the ‘religious’ that it was a wonder to some who knew him that he should have so completely overcome his shyness in intercourse with the sort of people he met in the fruit-picking camps. ‘It is difficult’, the Dean adds, ‘to see Wilfred as a missionary camper, but there he could be found, year after year, loving the Eastenders for themselves’.

Although he had come to reside in Cambridge, he did not for some years incorporate or join a college. For an acute and

scholarly mind like his the university would seem to be a natural and proper home, but apparently he was afraid of being too much drawn into the social life of the place, to the detriment of his devotion to the Oratory and its concerns. Not until 1935 was he persuaded by his friend and fellow-oratorian Edward Wynn (later Bishop of Ely) to incorporate at Pembroke. All the time, however, he was pursuing his scholarly interests in his chosen field of the New Testament. He became a member of the New Testament Seminar conducted first by F. C. Burkitt and then by his successor in the Norris-Hulse chair, and here his learning and his gift of astringent criticism were highly valued. Upon a solid foundation of classical scholarship he had built up a knowledge of the literature (and sub-literature) of the Hellenistic Age unsurpassed in this country. He ranged from the historians and philosophers to the shapeless detritus of ancient systems of religion and philosophy in the magical papyri, with a nice faculty for discriminating among these varying levels not always found in those who have written on the subject. This store of learning he had at his fingers' ends, ready for use whenever a problem in the New Testament could be illuminated by being set in its wider context. The very width of his learning bred a healthy scepticism of the fine-spun theories which are from time to time produced out of a too-intensive preoccupation with a limited field. It was a lesson in method to watch him at work when some such theory was introduced to the Seminar: how he would take it up point by point, confronting its ingenuities with specific evidence, highly relevant and not infrequently devastating. He had little patience with anything like impressionism, and liked concrete bits of evidence which could be handled and assessed. Some of the material which eventually found a place in his books was first presented in communications to the Seminar.

When Edward Wynn went to Ely as bishop, and the Oratory House closed down, early in the war, Knox became chaplain, and subsequently fellow, of Pembroke, and proved an inspiring and stimulating teacher of theology to undergraduates, who enjoyed his enthusiasms and his oddities. Examiners in the Tripos found that they could recognize his pupils both by the direction of their interest and by a certain freedom of approach. Possibly the less able men found him somewhat puzzling. In these later years he became a familiar figure in Cambridge streets, in shabby tweed jacket and flannel trousers, and a hat reputed the oldest in Cambridge. For he was as indifferent to

his outward appearance as he was to comfort. His chief relaxation was fishing in Herefordshire, where he shared a cottage with one of his brothers. He retained from his boyhood at Aston an ardent and lifelong interest in the fortunes of Aston Villa football club.

Knox left behind him a substantial body of writing. His first book of any size, *The Catholic Movement in the Church of England*, was published as early as 1923. It is a closely argued statement and defence of the somewhat advanced Anglo-Catholic position at which he had arrived. The themes with which this book dealt continued to occupy him. In 1926 he contributed to *Essays Catholic and Critical* an essay on 'The Authority of the Church'. In 1928 he wrote *The Church in Crisis*, and in 1929, with E. Milner-White (now Dean of York), *One God and Father of All*, a reply to a book by a priest whose defection to Rome about that time had somewhat fluttered Anglo-Catholic circles. With another collaborator, A. R. Vidler (now Dean of King's), he produced *The Development of Modern Catholicism* (1933) and *The Gospel of God and the Authority of the Church* (1937). What is most notable about this series of books is the way in which the rigidity of his early position was gradually relaxed, and his outlook became broader and more flexible. Already in 1928 he wrote (of *The Church in Crisis*) 'In so far as it modifies anything I have hitherto written, I would venture to ask that it may be regarded as representing a change of mind.' It was not the last change. Without any compromise of his Catholic loyalty, he showed a growing awareness of the large freedom of thought which was open to an Anglo-Catholic within that loyalty, as well as a growing appreciation of what other schools of thought had to contribute. Along with these essays in apologetics (sometimes polemics) his pastoral experience in the Oratory brought forth several small devotional books, notably *Meditation and Mental Prayer*, and *Penitence and Forgiveness*.

But it is safe to assume that Knox's widest and most permanent influence will be felt in the field of the New Testament and the history of early Christian thought. He approached the subject, from the beginning and all through, as an historian. He had behind him the discipline of the 'Greats' school of ancient history; the two teachers to whom in his first work of scholarship he acknowledges a special debt were both Roman historians. His work achieves an admirable objectivity. However deep and strong were his personal Christian and Catholic convictions, he approached the early Christian movement

historically as one strand in the complicated web of Hellenistic culture in the Roman Empire, and the writings of the New Testament as a proper part of the popular literature of the Greek-speaking world of the first century. Their specific character, he held, was the better appreciated the more they were read in relation to other contemporary writings.

He made his début in this field in 1925, with *St. Paul and the Church of Jerusalem*, 'composed', as he says in the preface, 'for the most part in the intervals of parochial work in London'. In this book he attempts to reconstruct the life and thought of the apostle in the period when he was in frequent touch, and in controversy, with the leaders of Jewish Christianity. In form, the book is a continuous critical exposition of the record in the Acts of the Apostles, but at every point the argument is supported by a formidable apparatus of notes and excursuses which together amount to a comprehensive study of the problems belonging to the very earliest period in the history of the Church. That period is notoriously ill documented. For the most part we have at best only one side of the controversy—Paul's own. Knox is concerned to let the opposition have its say, in order to attain a balanced view. Was Paul's claim, for example, to apostolic authority as unshakable as he would persuade his readers to believe? Or had James and his friends more to say for themselves than is commonly allowed? To answer such questions involves a delicate appreciation often of minute indications in our authorities. Knox collects every scrap of evidence he can trace in the New Testament or elsewhere, and examines it closely—examines it sometimes, one is tempted to say, under torture—bringing to light a good deal of fascinating information. The criticism which might colourably be brought is that he sometimes finds more in the evidence than is in fact there. Some of the positions he took up in this book he would no longer have maintained in maturer years, and in some respects new evidence has altered the picture, but his discussion cannot be ignored, and as a guide to the available material for the study of early Christian problems it holds a secure place of its own.

But it was with his second book, *St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles* (1939), that Knox broke into his special hunting ground, the relations between early Christian thought and that of the Hellenistic world in which it developed. The same theme is pursued in his Schweich Lectures, *Some Hellenistic Elements in Early Christianity* (1943). To these we might well add a lecture

on 'Pharisaism and Hellenism' which he contributed to the second of three volumes on *Judaism and Christianity* edited by Oesterley, Loewe, and Rosenthal (1937), which, by the way, affords a rare sample of his lecture style, a lighter and livelier one than he allowed himself in his more substantial works, giving play to his characteristic wit. The lecture is important because it supports with ample evidence one of the points he was most concerned to make: the large extent to which Hellenistic influence had already penetrated Judaism, even in Palestine, the seed-bed of Christianity. He would in no way have been surprised (as some people seem to have been) to find evidence of Hellenistic influence in the 'Dead Sea Scrolls', the literature of a peculiarly rigorous Jewish sect in Palestine; and he anticipated the tendency of much recent work to recognize the preponderant influence of Judaism in the beginnings of Gnosticism.

St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles (as its title would suggest) is conceived as a sequel to *St. Paul and the Church of Jerusalem*, and in form it follows its pattern; but in fact the continuous exposition of the Pauline Epistles (corresponding to that of the Acts in the earlier book) provides no more than a slender thread upon which the argument is strung, and occupies less than half the book. The first four chapters are devoted to a delineation of the thought world of Hellenism at the beginning of the Christian era, with its interpenetration of diverse faiths and philosophies. That there is a Hellenistic element in the New Testament is by now a commonplace, and most modern commentaries are enriched, or burdened, with an apparatus of parallels, too often of little significance when quoted outside the context from which they are taken. But what Knox gives us is a well-documented picture of the Hellenistic scene as a whole, with Judaism and, later, Christianity finding their natural place in it. Early Christian thought did not develop in a safe area protected from alien influences; it was from the time of its origin in Palestinian Judaism in natural and direct contact with wide-flowing currents of thought in the world at large. So much Knox shows his readers, and in doing so he also exposes the exaggerations to which the theme of 'Hellenistic influence' has often been subjected. Paul, he shows, sensitive as he was to the ways in which his fellow denizens of the Empire thought, was no deeply read student of the Greek tradition, nor was it his intention to propagate a system of Hellenistic-Christian philosophy (as Philo, for example, set himself to propagate a Hellenistic-Jewish philosophy). The core of his faith differed in no way from that of the

Palestinian Jews who were the first believers, but he could translate it out of the eschatological categories in which it was first presented, and give it a new setting in terms which would carry meaning for his Greek-speaking public without altering anything of its essential content. Such, stated very very broadly, is the argument which runs through this book, illustrated and enforced in notes and excursions which have an independent value of their own as studies of aspects of Hellenistic culture. It must be confessed that the method employed does not make it easy to envisage as a whole the thought of the first Christian theologian. Unsystematic he may have been, and his arguments may sometimes have been *ad hominem* or even *ad occasionem*, but there is an individuality and a coherence about his thought which hardly appear in Knox's account. But this was not his aim. The Pauline writings here serve to illustrate, not so much the workings of one man's mind, as the way in which, in the course of his missionary labours, the Christian Gospel began to naturalize itself in the Graeco-Roman world.

In the Schweich Lectures a similar method is applied to the study of the Gospels, especially the Fourth Gospel. 'There is no book in the New Testament which has suffered so much from the conventional dichotomy of Judaism into Palestinian and Hellenistic as this Gospel': so he writes, drawing the moral implicit in a large part of his studies. In the Gospels, however, more particularly in the Synoptic Gospels, he recognizes that we must allow for a definitely Semitic element. The question in fact is, how far, in what ways, and within what limits, an originally Semitic tradition has been transformed in the process of entering the Greek Gospels. From comparison with a wide range of Hellenistic literature he draws criteria of language, association of ideas, and literary method, which he applies in detail to each of the Gospels, and in this way arrives at an answer to his question.

The last book which Knox lived to complete was made up of a short course of lectures on *The Acts of the Apostles* (1948). Here we have in brief the outcome of his wide-ranging studies in the literature of early Christianity as they bear upon the debated problems of the authorship of Acts, its sources, and its historical value. Some readers at the time expressed surprise that a writer whom they had regarded (not altogether unjustly) as a somewhat 'radical' critic now came out in favour, substantially, of the traditional estimate of Acts, in opposition to strong currents of contemporary opinion. The surprise was justified

only on the assumption that a truly objective criticism will invariably result in overthrowing traditional positions; an assumption which is not necessarily valid. Criticism of the Lucan writings is doubtless on the move, but the weight of the judgments set forth in this book (slight as it is) must be estimated in view of the author's long years of intensive preoccupation with the problems of Acts, which had stood near the centre of his interest ever since he produced his first work of scholarship in 1925, and betrays itself in one way or another in almost every book he wrote in succeeding years.

At the time of his death Knox was occupied with further work on the Synoptic Gospels, concentrated now upon the questions of their interrelations and the sources behind them—the 'Synoptic Problem' in its classical form. Much was already in writing when he died, and some of it had been presented to the Seminar, but it was far from completion. At the cost of much labour on the part of Dr. Henry Chadwick (now Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford), for whom it was a work of *pietas*, two volumes have been published posthumously under the title *The Sources of the Synoptic Gospels*. Knox is here carrying forward the interrupted discussion of *Quellengeschichte*, which has been in the background for a generation or more. He all but explicitly links his work with the earlier tradition of criticism by taking as his starting-point a passage in the *Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums* of Edward Meyer, an historian for whom, as for Knox himself, the early history of Christianity was a part of the *Geschichte des Altertums*. It is not, of course, that he was either unaware of or indifferent to more recent movements in criticism, particularly in the school of *Formgeschichte*. He was willing to make appropriate use of its methods, not without occasional trenchant observations on its extravagances. But its conception of the primitive Church itself, and of the way in which the Gospels emerged from it, he found unconvincing, and he continued to regard the Synoptic Gospels 'not as collections of anecdotes but as compilations of sources'. He elucidates the methods employed by the evangelists not so much by analogies drawn from the transmission of folk-tales as by comparison with such Hellenistic writers as Plutarch and Diodorus Siculus. All this is rather aside from the main track of contemporary criticism, but none the worse for that. While the work is manifestly unfinished, and lacks the reconsideration and revision which the author would undoubtedly have given it, it merits more notice than it has yet received.

Wilfred Knox's work was recognized at Cambridge by the degrees of B.D. in 1937 and D.D. in 1943. He became a Fellow of the British Academy in 1948. His comparatively early death in 1950 lost us both a scholar whose learning was matched by his integrity, and a delightful human person.

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