

EARLY EVANGELICAL FICTION

(concluded)

by A. G. NEWELL

IN the concluding instalment of his study of early evangelical fiction Mr. Newell looks at the works of Legh Richmond, Rowland Hill and Mrs. Sherwood.

II. LEGH RICHMOND

LEGH RICHMOND'S celebrated *Dairyman's Daughter* cannot really be compared with the similar work of our other authors. It sold as well, and the collected edition of his three tales—*The Young Cottager*, *The Negro Servant* and *The Dairyman's Daughter*—published by The Religious Tract Society under the title *Annals of the Poor* in 1814, was issued at least as late as 1883. But the Rector of Turvey lacks the qualities of his greater contemporaries. His success was as complete, his part in the struggle to replace popular infidel, revolutionary and degrading reading matter with wholesome Christian books and pamphlets was as illustrious; but his ability is of a wholly lower order. He seems more at home editing *The Fathers of the English Church*, prefixing a memoir to Miss Sinclair's *A Letter on the Principles of the Christian Faith*, or delivering his *Sermon on the Sin of Cruelty towards the Brute Creation*, than recounting his "authentic narrative" of Elizabeth Wallbridge, the dairyman's daughter.

This little work was first published in 1809 in the *Christian Guardian*, which also carried Richmond's other stories. It is said to have been translated into nineteen languages, including Gaelic, Welsh, Italian and Russian, and its circulation in its native English was immense. During its author's lifetime well over a million copies in English alone were printed.¹ Today however it is wellnigh unreadable. Hannah More still interests and pleases by her stylistic elegance and her fresh and vigorous common sense. Mrs. Sherwood still catches the imagination and draws us into her narratives, exacting our appreciation, however grudging, for her

¹ Two million is the usual estimate. R. D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago, 1957), p. 101, quoting R.T.S. figures, gives 1,354,000 copies as the combined circulation of the three tales "in less than half a century". [The number of those who experienced a genuine evangelical conversion through reading it must run into thousands.]

very real talents. Rowland Hill enlivens and stimulates. But *The Dairyman's Daughter* is as cold and lifeless as Elizabeth Wallbridge's tombstone. Essentially it is a series of sermons, written in a stilted, turgid, condescending manner which at first amuses, then infuriates, and finally bores. It is difficult to finish the book.²

Here is the beginning of this incredibly popular tale:

It is a delightful employment to discover and trace the operations of Divine Grace, as they are manifested in the dispositions and lives of God's real children. It is peculiarly gratifying to observe how frequently among the poorer classes of mankind, the sunshine of mercy beams upon the heart, and bears witness to the image of Christ which the Spirit of God has impressed thereupon.

This is good enough, no doubt, for a periodical with an assured sale among a certain class of Christians, but it is scarcely successful in encouraging the reader to continue with the 160 pages of small type. The book is written in the first person in Richmond's own character, and recounts his meeting with Miss Wallbridge after she had sent him a letter, and his conversations and correspondence with her before she dies of consumption. The author insists upon the authenticity of his narrative and presentation, and says he is transcribing Elizabeth's letters from the originals. If this is so, she must have spoken and written in that evangelical pseudo-Biblical dialect that John Foster so roundly condemned.³ She addresses her reverend correspondent in a singularly hortatory manner which obscures the point of the letters in a mass of cliché-ridden verbiage. It is all rather like a mediocre candidate trying to impress the examiners. When Elizabeth forgets to use the dialect, she can express herself briefly. It is a relief after pages of this sort of thing—

Oh! sir, be ambitious for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. It will add to the lustre of your crown in glory, as well as to your present joy and peace.

to pass on to her real message. When Richmond stops moralizing and attempts to render dialogue he is not at all successful. His characters speak like puppets. It is depressingly lifeless. The

² It had retained its charm, however, for an Anglican of a different school of churchmanship at the end of the century. Canon J. H. Overton wrote, "As a popular tract-writer, Legh Richmond will bear comparison even with Hannah More. . . . He is a very pleasing writer; his style is plain and pure" (*The English Church in the Nineteenth Century* (1800-1833) [London, 1894], p. 174). The modern view is strongly represented by Charles I. Foster (*An Errand of Mercy* [Chapel Hill, 1960], pp. 73f.) who emphasizes the tract's emotional tone and "overripe sentimentality". M. J. Quinlan, *Victorian Prelude* (New York, 1941), p. 194, also stresses its sentimentality and pious platitudes.

³ *Essays in a Series of Letters*, 6th ed. (London, 1819), pp. 287-325.

scene in which the clergyman interrogates the dying young woman to elicit the standard death-bed testimony carries no conviction. Mrs. Sherwood's death-beds, however edifying, are much more realistic and readable.

"Were you not soon convinced," I said, "that your salvation must be an act of active grace on the part of God, wholly independent of your own previous works or deserving?"

"Dear sir, what were my works before I heard that sermon, but evil, carnal, selfish, and ungodly? The thoughts of my heart, from my youth upward, were only evil, and that continually. And my deservings, what were they but the deservings of a fallen, depraved, careless soul, that regarded neither law nor gospel!"

The doctrine is impeccable; the pill is a tried and tested one; but who can find this sugar palatable?

Elizabeth's letters, Richmond's moralizings, the wooden narrative and the fossilized dialogues, are relieved by set pieces of descriptive writing. The Isle of Wight artist George Brannon's *Sketches of Scenes in the Isle of Wight, with explanatory Notes, designed as a Key to the Local Descriptions of the Rev. Legh Richmond, as contained in his Annals of the Poor* (1832) and *The Landscape Beauties of the Isle of Wight, as described by . . . Legh Richmond* (1843), and a book called *Isle of Wight: Scenery of Richmond's Annals of the Poor* (1860), indicate that these descriptive pieces were well known and appreciated. To the modern reader they nevertheless seem all of a piece with the rest of the book. A typical passage is where Richmond recounts his first sight of the house at which Elizabeth Wallbridge was then employed.

One end of the house was entirely clothed with the thick foliage of an immense ivy, which climbed beyond customary limits, and embraced a lofty chimney top to its very summit. Such a tree seemed congenial to the walls that supported it, and conspired with the antique fashion of the place to carry imagination back to the days of our ancestors. As I approached, I was led to reflect on the lapse of the ages, and the successive generations of men, each in their turn also disappearing and leaving their inheritance to be enjoyed by others.

In the course of the narrative he describes the view several times. His reflexions are pious and orthodox, but his descriptive writing is simply lifeless jargon. He tries hard to convey the natural beauty of the Isle of Wight and his obviously genuine pleasure in it: he is writing of local scenery which he knows intimately—he had been curate of Brading and Yaverland there before obtaining the living of Turvey. And yet he can use only received eighteenth-century clichés, words, phrases, images so second-hand that they are no longer vehicles, but substitutes, for thinking.

The sun shone, and gilded the waves with a glittering light, that

sparkled in the most brilliant manner.

Many grotesque rocks, with little trickling streams of water occasionally breaking out of them, varied the recluse scenery, and produced a romantic and pleasing effect.

Another [road] winded round the curved sides of the adjacent hill, and was adorned both above and below with numerous sheep feeding on the herbage of the down.

Legh Richmond's sincerity is obvious. His purpose is laudable. This tale ends with an appeal to unbelievers for repentance and faith in the Saviour of the dairyman's daughter, and to Christians for consecration and service to their Master. The poor are especially addressed and admonished to learn from the story of the poor woman they have just read, so that like Elizabeth Wallbridge they might become rich in faith. Richmond's success with this and his other tales was undoubtedly a major factor in the evangelical literary campaign. We must not scoff at a man who was asked by Hannah More to become the successor to Mr. Drewitt as curate of Cheddar and thereupon wrote in his diary, "Surely, if vanity wanted food, it is here—to be solicited by a Hannah More to supply the place of a Drewitt!"⁴ Although *The Young Cottager*, briefer, better organized, more sentimental but more direct and personal, is quite impressive and has more impact than *The Dairyman's Daughter*, the foregoing analysis shows that Richmond's talents as a writer were of a very negligible order indeed. Today he is almost unreadable even for one who has every sympathy with his aims and his doctrinal position.

The enormous sale of *The Dairyman's Daughter* must be attributed, one suspects, to two facts. Firstly, the tale's claim to be an "authentic narrative" enabled it to evade the stricter evangelicals' objections to fiction, and made it acceptable in pious households as a book (or tract) which expressed evangelical sentiments in evangelical language. Secondly, as a message to the poor, it would be eagerly read by those who could afford very little in the way of reading matter, but who were thirsty for something—anything—on which to practise their new literacy. Richmond himself catalogued Elizabeth Wallbridge's humble library for us—"a Bible and Prayerbook, 'Doddridge's Rise and Progress', 'Romaine's Life, Walk, and Triumph of Faith', 'Bunyan's Pilgrim', 'Alleine's Alarm', 'Baxter's Saints' Everlasting Rest', a hymn-book, and a few tracts." We may guess that these books number rather more than many Christians in her position would possess. It was to supply these people with reading matter that such evangelical tales

⁴ Martha More, *Mendip Annals*, ed. A. Roberts, 3rd ed. (London, 1859), pp. 191f.

were distributed. (The situation today in many parts of the world is the same—missionaries are crying out for Christian literature with which to supply newly literate people, who are already offered cheap and attractive materialist propaganda.) Although Leigh Richmond's place in the evangelical literary scheme is historically secure, a critical reading must reject his most popular work as intrinsically of little literary value.

III. ROWLAND HILL

Rowland Hill (1744-1833) is a most interesting character. The sixth son of the baronet of the same name, and brother of Sir Richard, the theological controversialist, he was well-known at Cambridge as a devout and actively zealous Christian, and became the friend of John Berridge. Because of his irregularities when curate of Kingston in itinerating and preaching whenever and wherever the occasion presented itself, the Archbishop of York prevented the Bishop of Carlisle from ordaining Hill to priest's orders. He was disappointed, but remarked, "Missing of full orders, I thought it was my duty again to begin my public labours as usual," and used to say that he "ran off with only one ecclesiastical boot on."⁵ The scene of his best-known ministry was Surrey Chapel, London, which he opened on Whit Sunday, 1783. His "earnest, eloquent, eccentric"⁶ preaching attracted large congregations. "The independent and ambiguous ecclesiastical position which he assumed, as theoretically a Churchman, and practically a Dissenter,—a Dissenter within the Church, a Churchman among Dissenters—necessarily involved him . . . in continual polemic skirmishing. His very Catholicism sometimes put on an aggressive form; for of nothing was he so intolerant as of sectarianism."⁷ "His theology was Calvinistic, his preaching Methodist, and his liturgy Anglican."⁸ But our concern is not so much with his sermons or hymns, nor with his pamphlet on vaccination (1806),⁹ but with his *Village Dialogues*, published in 1810. The book went through several rapid editions and had reached its 36th by 1851. The 33rd edition "with entirely new dialogues and enlargements, and the final corrections of the author" was issued by Virtue in 1824, in two volumes, delightfully illustrated, each of five hundred pages.

⁵ V. J. Charlesworth, *Rowland Hill* (London, 1876), p. 27.

⁶ *D.N.B.*

⁷ V. J. Charlesworth, *op. cit.*, p. 76, quoting *Cabinet Annual Register* for 1833.

⁸ A. L. Drummond, *The Churches in English Fiction* (Leicester, 1950), p. 10n.

⁹ John Venn introduced vaccination to the parish of Clapham in 1800 (M. Hennell, *John Venn and the Clapham Sect* [London, 1958], p. 143).

Although *Village Dialogues* are cast in fictional form their individual titles are forbidding and indicate Hill's didactic intention. "On the Evil Nature and Tendency of Stage Exhibitions", "The Contrast: or, Conjugal Happiness, Founded on Chastity, Fidelity, and Affection", "On the Doctrine of Justification", and "The Evils of the Slave Trade Delineated" are representative. Formal orthodoxy is castigated, the "folly of Sectarian Bigotry" is demonstrated, Socinianism is "exposed", Antinomianism is "unmasked", and Enthusiasm is "detected". The author's interest is clearly theological. But he was not an outstanding preacher for nothing. The dialogues are not separate, dry theological arguments aimed at popularizing a particular brand of Christianity; they make a unified work by presenting the same characters in a slight but progressive narrative.

Each part is written as a theatrical dialogue, with minimum directions enclosed in parentheses. Occasionally Hill personally opens and closes his scene in a paragraph, sometimes new characters or scenes are sketched before the dialogue begins, and every so often the author permits himself a polemical footnote. The two volumes comprise fifty dialogues, and tell how the godly farm labourer Thomas Newman, who works for Farmer Littleworth, is responsible, through his exemplary manner of life and fearless testimony, for bringing his master to hear the Rev. Mr. Lovegood, the local evangelical incumbent. Littleworth is converted, together with his daughter Nancy and his son Henry, who had been the chief village delinquent before running away to sea. The rest of *Village Dialogues* uses the now zealous Littleworth, Nancy and Henry, with Mr. Lovegood and a host of others, to explain Christian doctrines; to illustrate the vital necessity of conversion for the unbelieving and the formal, and of sanctification for the true Christian; to indicate the evangelical attitude to various social, political, ecclesiastical and moral matters; and—not least—to attack and ridicule perversions of Christian belief or practice, whether they are those of the Roman Catholics, or "rational" dissenters, or formally orthodox or deistical Churchmen, or the antinomian and enthusiastic evangelical fringe. There is a profusion of characters, who speak and act according to their station in life. They have allegorical names: the formal clergymen are called Dolittle, Shallow, Blindman, Purblind, Archdeacon Smooth-tongue, and so on; Dr. Dronish and Mr. Smirking are Socinian dissenters; the local Roman Catholics are Squire Massman and Father Canting; the godly have names like Squire Worthy, Mr. Considerate, Mr. Honest and Mr. Gravity; while Sam Blood,

Will Frolic, Ned Sparkish, Squire Bluster and Lord Rakish are among those representing the heedless multitude of all classes. Hill's intention is stated unequivocally in his preface—"that it might be beneficial to the souls of men."

Village Dialogues draws on and reflects a lifetime crammed with incident. The experience and the vivid character of its author give the book its unique flavour. In Dialogue XIII we learn the history of the Littleworths.

The family of the Littleworths . . . were unfortunately educated. In point of religion they were tutored in all the high church notions of the day; so that the least deviation from the established church, was, in their esteem, more to be dreaded than a thousand deviations from the common rules of morality: insomuch, that even cursing and swearing was a much smaller offence than attending a *conventicle*; and scarcely any offence at all, provided people exercised their profane talents against the Dissenters. Report also says, that old Mr. Simon Littleworth, with all his family, used to drink the Pretender's health after dinner, and that it was well he did not lose his life in the rebellion in the year 1745, for entertaining and encouraging the rebel army when in the North, against the present family upon the throne, by whom our civil and religious liberties were established. Mr. Simon Littleworth, the father of the present Farmer Littleworth, loved getting money to his heart, but could not bear to spend it, even on a decent education for his children. He died about the year 1776, leaving a fortune among his children of about three hundred and fifty pounds each: entailing also upon them, all the prejudices of an unhappy day and generation; conceiving higher notions of the religion of Dr. Sacheverell than that of Jesus Christ and his Apostles.

Hill writes with easy fluency in a conversational, colloquial style; his vocabulary is very simple, his sentence-structure uncomplicated. The rhythms of the extract just quoted are those of the speaking voice. In other words, Hill writes as he spoke, and, presumably, as he preached. It is not irrelevant to remember that "a Scotch minister stated that he never heard an anecdote from a pulpit in his native land until Mr. Hill began his itinerant labours there."¹⁰ *Village Dialogues* seizes and holds the reader's attention, and the narrative framework insists upon his continuing to read until the end.

One of the qualities most immediately apparent in Hill's work is his humour. Ironic indignation informs the passage already given; a broader humour comes out in many places.

Thus by marrying a *fortune*, he had the *misfortune* to be married to one, who conceived she had a right to "dictate and usurp authority over her husband", or according to the delicate style of the day, *to wear the small clothes*. This in point of civility, was to be submitted to, at least during the honeymoon; but to the sad discomfiture of Mr.

¹⁰ V. J. Charlesworth, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

Steadyman, she has contrived to wear them from that time to this (Dialogue XIII).

Here, as everywhere in the book, whether in the dialogues proper or in the introductions or commentaries, the words to be stressed are italicized—another indication of the conversational tone. Here is Mr. Lovegood telling the Worthys of his visit to the Rev. Mr. Fribble:

The first thing that struck me, was the furniture of his room. On one peg was hung a pair of skaits, with red Morocco straps: on another his violin; at another place his bows and arrows were exhibited, as he was a member of an archer's club; over his chimney-piece were piled, his gun and other accoutrements for that sport, with two or three dog-collars; then there were his backgammon-table, his cribbage board, and among other pretty play things, he had his battledoors, and shuttlecocks (Dialogue XXXVII).

In this passage the effect is gained by the heaping up of incongruous sporting objects in the clergyman's study; "pretty play things" carries all the weight of Mr. Lovegood's godly scorn. One further example of Hill's humour must suffice, although the book is full of good things.

Mrs. Mary, it seems, some years ago, in one of her over credulous fits, wishing for some foresight as it respected herself, sent a guinea to an artful astrologer that he might cast her nativity; and the prognostication was, that she was to be married to a surgeon. Through this unfortunate circumstance, she set her cap at every surgeon and apothecary for miles around the neighbourhood. She once went so far as to feign herself sick, that she might have an excuse to send for one of the gentlemen of the faculty: and though she gave him to understand how matters had been predicted respecting her future life; yet, alas! such was the Doctor's incredulity, that notwithstanding the prognostication, he could not believe that he was to be the man (Dialogue XIII).

This is a masterly ironic anecdote in the best English tradition.¹¹

The dialogues themselves are at their best when the participants hold opposing views. They progress with a vividness and a vigour that can be paralleled in the anecdotes about Hill which have been preserved. Very rarely indeed—only in the longer theological arguments—do they sound stilted or false. For example, Mr. Dolittle, the formal clergyman, comes to interview the newly-converted Farmer Littleworth:

¹¹ It is perhaps not surprising that Wesley could also write like this on occasion in his *Journal*, e.g.:

"The Captain . . . broke open one or two doors [looking for the hidden Wesley in his lodgings], and got on a chair, to look on top of a bed: But his foot slipping (as he was not a man made for climbing), he fell down backward all his length." (*Works*, Zondervan unrevised reprint of 1872 ed., II, p. 179.)

Mr. Dolittle meets the Farmer at the door, and thus accosts him. Well, Master Littleworth, I am come to see how you are; I was afraid you were ill of the gout, for you have not been at Church above these three months.

Far. I am obliged to you, Sir, for your kind inquiries; but I thank God, of late I have been better than usual.

Dolit. How is it then, Sir, that you have been so remiss in your duty, by not attending your Church?

Far. Oh no, Sir! I have not neglected Church, we go more constantly than ever; for I and my daughter Nance, have lately been to hear Mr. Lovegood.

Dolit. So I have been informed, Sir; and in a little while longer, I should not wonder if he were to drive both of you mad, by his *enthusiastic harangues*.

Far. Why, Sir, did you ever hear him?

Dolit. I hear him! No, Sir, nor shall I ever disgrace my character by attending such *modern seducers*.

Far. Did you ever talk to him, Sir?

Dolit. I talk to him! no; nor will any other *rational* Clergyman hold conversation with such *fellows*.

Far. "Does our law judge any man before it hears him?"

Dolit. O, Sir! This is bringing matters to a fine pass. You can quote Scripture against your Minister already.

After much argument the visit ends with the good farmer, appalled at Dolittle's notions of Christianity, extolling Mr. Lovegood's character and ministry.

Dolit. O, Sir! You seem to be struck with the spirit of devotion; you'll go to prayer with us next.

Far. Oh no, Sir! I would rather leave that with you. Nancy my child, reach Mr. Dolittle the Bible; it will be more profitable to us all, if he reads a Chapter, and expounds it, and goes to prayer with us, and that is the way Mr. Lovegood does when he goes a visiting.

Dolit. (in a rage.) I have been now Rector of this Parish above these nineteen years, and I never was addressed about going to prayer in such a manner before. Sir, this rude treatment compels me to leave your house immediately. Mrs. Littleworth, I wish you a good night. Young ladies, your humble servant (Dialogue VI).

The form in which the book is cast prevents the presentation of action other than through the conversationalists themselves, but the sheer drive of what one might call the *mental* action, the enormous energy with which Hill presses the evangelical case, more than compensates for the lack of exciting physical incident. It is true that at times the godly shed too many tears and thus draw the book to the verge of sentimentality; they tend also to utter pious exclamations and sometimes whole speeches in the evangelical jargon. But Hill's wit and vigour and overwhelming urgent sincerity save him from foundering. Especially in the dialogues directed against Socinianism and other perversions his theological expositions and distinctions appear to be above the heads of simple readers, but the

abstract is very quickly personified and given concrete illustration; indeed, every abstract concept is soon brought down to the presumed level of Hill's audience. Evangelical indignation and zeal assist the presentation of the argument: those needing warning and correction must have been constantly in the author's mind as he wrote.

Village Dialogues remains a thoroughly readable work. It is historically important as part of the influential evangelical programme of its time; it is valuable as a revelation of Rowland Hill's personality, beliefs and ability. Out of his faith, his zeal and his experience he produced, not a masterpiece like Bunyan's with its universal significance and appeal, but a work of considerable artistic merit, which deserves much better treatment than its usual brief mention in the list of best-selling evangelical tales.

IV. MRS. SHERWOOD

The Fairchild Family was also a very popular book. "Most children of the English middle-class born in the first quarter of the 19th century may be said to have been brought up on *The Fairchild Family*."¹² "Few children of the Gentry . . . can have escaped the influence of Mrs. Sherwood's peculiar genius."¹³ Her masterpiece appeared in three parts, the first being published in 1818, the second in 1842, and the last, in which her daughter Sophia assisted her mother, in 1847. The book was a best-seller and remained in print (in an expurgated version) until the 1930's.¹⁴

The Fairchild Family is an unashamedly didactic story which relates the very ordinary life of a country family and their two servants. Mr. and Mrs. Fairchild have three children, Lucy (about nine), Emily, and Henry (about seven); these children occupy the foreground of the scene. Part I consists of a number of incidents concerning the children which are made the bases for short religious discourses by the author (who interrupts the narrative from time to time in her own person), by one or other of the parents, or by some Christian friend. This pattern is varied by the simple device of making the characters recount improving stories based on their own experience, and by having the children read aloud the tracts which they buy or are given. One advantage of this favourite trick is that the amount of Christian commentary on any one incident is increased enormously, for everybody concerned can point the moral—the tract writer, the children reading

¹² *D.N.B.*

¹³ N. R. Smith, *The State of Mind of Mrs. Sherwood* (London, 1947), p. xiv.

¹⁴ M. F. Thwaite, *From Primer to Pleasure* (London, 1963), p. 62n.

it, and the adults listening, and the omniscient authoress herself. These stories within the main narrative are complete in themselves and could well have been published separately as genuine tracts.

Part I is divided not into chapters but into short sections each with an appropriate heading, whether it is part of the main narrative, or somebody's story, or a tract to be read. Thus we have hardly been introduced to the Fairchilds and their situation before the first heading appears, "Man before the Fall". This is succeeded by "General Depravity of Mankind in all Countries after the Fall", and by such sections as "On Envy", "On the Formation of Sin in the Heart", and "Fatal Effects of Disobedience to Parents". Parts II and III are divided into chapters, but the less sophisticated headings still occur, and "Annie Kelly, or, the Blessed Effects of Sacred Music" makes up the bulk of Chapters xiv and xv of Part III. In the two later Parts Mrs. Sherwood introduces more characters, improves the family's fortunes and changes the scene to The Grove, near Reading, sixty miles or so from their former home. Both Parts II and III hang together better than Part I; there is a steady narrative progression, the various incidents are longer, and the moralizing does not seem so intrusive. The movement of the story in Part I is jerky, because of the continual pointing of the moral; Parts II and III flow much more smoothly.

It is hard, today, to read *The Fairchild Family* without a smile and, sometimes, a feeling of revulsion. The Fairchilds in Part I demonstrate an astonishing severity towards their children. The headings already mentioned reveal the primary message of Part I—the total depravity of mankind. This doctrine is hammered home with relentless vigour; the slowest child reading the book could not possibly mistake its import. There is something of relish in Mrs. Sherwood's unvarying allusion to the subject. We are reminded of Mr. Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre* (who is said to have been modelled on the Rev. W. Carus Wilson), that "black pillar . . . the straight, narrow, sable-clad shape" with "the grim face . . . like a carved mask", whose precepts and practice resembled his appearance and terrified the unfortunate inmates of his evangelical charity school at Lowood. But neither Mrs. Sherwood in the flesh nor her projection of herself in the persons of Mr. and Mrs. Fairchild are like Charlotte Brontë's "black marble clergyman".¹⁵ In fact, the increase in Mrs. Sherwood's technical skill seen in the artistic superiority of Parts II and III over the much earlier Part I is paralleled by a mellowing of her subject matter in the later Parts.

¹⁵ *Jane Eyre*, Chapters 4-7.

Part I contains the celebrated incident which begins with the children quarrelling over a doll.

Mr. Fairchild took the doll away from Henry, and, taking a rod out of the cupboard, he whipped the hands of all the three children till they smarted again, saying—

“Let dogs delight to bark and bite
For God has made them so ;
Let bears and lions growl and fight,
For 'tis their nature too.
But, children, you should never let
Such angry passions rise ;
Your little hands were never made
To tear each other's eyes.”

After which he made them stand in a corner of the room, without their breakfasts ; neither did they get anything to eat all the morning, and, what was worse, their papa and mamma looked very gravely at them.

Although the children are forgiven before dinner, their father feels it necessary to take them to Blackwood to inspect the corpse of a murderer hanging on the local gibbet.

The body had not yet fallen to pieces, although it had hung there some years. It had on a blue coat, a silk handkerchief round the neck, with shoes and stockings, and every part of the dress still entire; but the face of the corpse was so shocking that the children could not look upon it. . . . The wind blew strong and shook the body upon the gibbet, rattling the chains by which it hung. “Oh, let us go, papa!” said the children, pulling Mr. Fairchild's coat. “Not yet,” said Mr. Fairchild; “I must first tell you the history of that wretched man before we go from this place.”

Later, little Henry is flogged, locked up and put on bread and water because he refuses to learn his first Latin lesson properly. Parental severity like this, it has been suggested, would today receive at least a reprimand from the NSPCC.¹⁶ But Mrs. Sherwood had been brought up strictly herself.

It was the fashion for children to wear iron collars round the neck, with back-boards strapped over the shoulders. To one of these I was subjected from my sixth to my thirteenth year. I generally did all my lessons standing in the stocks, with this same collar round my neck; it was put on in the morning, and seldom taken off till late in the evening; and it was Latin which I had to study! At the same time, I had the plainest possible food; dry bread and cold milk were my principal food, and I never sat on a chair in my mother's presence.¹⁷ Perhaps it is not too fanciful to recognize a criticism of her parents' educational scheme in that chapter of *Caroline Mordaunt* which describes Mrs. Fenton's rigorous regime for her daughters' upbringing, a system which succeeds in nearly killing them.

¹⁶ A. L. Drummond, *op. cit.*, p. 17n.

¹⁷ *The Life and Times of Mrs. Sherwood*, ed. F. J. H. Darton (London, 1910, p. 34.

There are no more gibbets or floggings in Parts II and III. But Mrs. Sherwood's convictions as to the true nature of the sinful human heart are unchanged. Mrs. Fairchild, trying to impress the doctrine of total depravity on Bessy, a good-hearted but thoughtless teenager, says:

What am I but such an one as yourself—of the same nature, which is utterly vile. . . . By nature [your aunt] is the same as all of us, and that, the Bible says, is utterly bad (Part II).

The maid Betty, explaining to little Henry that an over-friendly hostess at an inn had been foolish in praising him, says:

In the Bible we are told that the children should be trained in the way they should go, and that also the heart of man is desperately wicked, so that who can know it? So you see, Master Henry, if Mrs. Bunce was to allow a child to have its own way, the heart of that child, being of a vile nature, for such are all our hearts, "for there is none good, no not one", she would not be training up that child in the way it should go, but in the way that would lead to sin and misery (Part III).

The quiet comedy of the servant's manner of speech is not meant to invalidate her point.

The emphasis on human wickedness in *The Fairchild Family* is not unnaturally accompanied by references to hell, and a fondness for lingering death-beds. "No Evangelical writer could resist a good wallow in a death bed scene, particularly if the victim were of tender years."¹⁸ Thus Part I ends with the death of Henry's friend Charles Trueman, "one of the most pious little boys in all that country." Mrs. Fairchild senior relates the death of young Emily Vaughan, the daughter of a previous owner of The Grove, who is converted on her death-bed, in Part II. Later, in Part III, old Mrs. Fairchild's death is described, and less than forty pages further on, Lucy reads aloud to the others the tract called "Annie Kelly" which concludes with the little heroine's death. The last moments of the righteous in this book conform to an edifying pattern. Mrs. Sherwood's aim, of course, is to expound and illustrate the comforts of salvation to those about to die. It is interesting to contrast her death scenes with the bold stroke by which Bunyan makes Mr. Badman die "like a lamb, or, as they call it, like a chrisom-child, quietly and without fear."¹⁹ Deaths in the main narrative of *The Fairchild Family* are followed by full descriptions

¹⁸ M. M. Maison: *Search your Soul, Eustace* (London, 1961), p. 92. But Charles Simeon objected to triumphant death-bed scenes (C. Smyth, *Simeon and Church Order* [Cambridge, 1940], p. 312), and High Churchmen waxed just as morbid (D. Newsome in *Historical Journal*, VI [1963], p. 298).

¹⁹ *Grace Abounding & The Life and Death of Mr. Badman* (Everyman ed.), p. 300.

of the funerals. It must be said that Mrs. Sherwood's own death-bed was in the tradition. Her daughter wrote:

She added, solemnly and clearly . . . "Remember this, my children, that God is love. He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him." These were the last intelligible words I heard her utter; for when I saw her again, at four in the morning, death had begun its work, though she called me by name, for she knew me.

I am told by those who could observe the scene that her sufferings were not severe, but though present I can remember nothing of it but that its sorrows made me motherless.²⁰

The fundamental emphasis on the doctrine of the total depravity of mankind with the concomitant interest in death-beds²¹ and the fear of hell would leave Mrs. Sherwood's readers with a grotesque conception of Christianity. But her teaching is far from being wholly negative. Equal emphasis is placed throughout on the universal need for redemption, which can be brought about only by the Holy Spirit. *The Fairchild Family* makes it very clear that salvation is the gift of the sovereign grace of God through the merits of the crucified and risen Christ, and that the good works which follow it are produced only by the power of the Holy Spirit in the believer's heart. At every turn we are reminded that human preaching and example are vain unless the Lord uses the witness of His servants. Sometimes, as in the case of "The History of Little Bernard Low" (in Part II), salvation is bestowed without any human exhortation whatever. While seriously ill after hearing of the presumed deaths of his parents, the spoilt Bernard "had received a new and never-dying nature; his Redeemer had proved His power in bringing even this proud and stubborn boy to submit himself to His divine will". Again and again the point is driven home that right thoughts and motives and actions are implanted in the hearts of the possessors of the new nature only by the Holy Spirit Himself. The constant struggle between the old and the new natures is a prominent theme.

The practical result of these doctrines is seen in the explicit and implicit stress on the absolute necessity of children's obedience to their parents, and on the importance of the correct ordering of English society; everybody should cheerfully, diligently and piously seek to perform the duties of that position in which God has placed him. Mrs. Sherwood's own loyalty to this principle can be seen in the way in which she portrays every Protestant clergy-

²⁰ *The Life and Times of Mrs. Sherwood*, p. 491.

²¹ See *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 June, 1951, Children's Books Section, p.v., for a defence of the morbid interest in early children's books on the ground that death was a fact of common experience which had to be faced.

man in *The Fairchild Family* as a true pastor of souls earnestly trying to bring his flock to a knowledge of their need of salvation in Christ. The book contains nobody like Dr. Dronish, Mr. Dolittle or Archdeacon Smoothtongue. The authoress delivers hardly any anti-Roman Catholic propaganda, either. Henry asks his mother, "Are Roman Catholics Christians?" and she replies that they "are called Christians, but there is much in their religion which the Bible does not approve", and the character given to Father St. Goar is that of a prying busybody, but these instances make up the sum of Mrs. Sherwood's references to Rome in her best-known work. In the 1830's, however, she published several anti-Roman works—*Victoria*, *The Nun*, *The Monk of Cimiès*, all novels, and *Sabbaths on the Continent*, a travel book.

If *The Fairchild Family* were to succeed in teaching, it had to please its readers. It is claimed for Mrs. Sherwood that she is the best story-teller of all the "moral fabulists" except Maria Edgeworth. As examples of her simple but powerful language a literary historian selects her descriptions of meals, and the visit to the gallows—"a masterpiece of horror."²² Another critic says that this book "serves to show what an admirable writer for children Mrs. Sherwood was by nature."²³ A harsher view asserts bluntly that "what she had was the easy running invention, formidable fertility and undistinguished mind of the third-rate popular writer."²⁴ This evaluation is at least partially the result of a deep distaste for Mrs. Sherwood's doctrinal views.²⁵

When all has been said about Mrs. Sherwood's doctrine in *The Fairchild Family*, it must be admitted that she can write. Aiming to interest children and to inculcate Christian beliefs, she wrote simply and clearly. She says elsewhere that children, particularly, "consider all matters impertinent . . . which do not immediately promote the progress of the story."²⁶ Well aware of this universal requirement she displays a considerable narrative skill which carries the reader along to the moral before he realizes he has got through the sugar and reached the pill. Some of the tales within *The Fairchild Family* are little masterpieces of story-telling, and

²² F. J. H. Darton in *Cambridge History of English Literature*, XI, p. 381. There is also a discriminating appreciation in his *Children's Books in England*, 2nd. ed. (Cambridge, 1958), pp. 175-177.

²³ *T.L.S.*, loc cit.

²⁴ *T.L.S.*, 18 January 1947, p. 36.

²⁵ F. R. Leavis dislikes Bunyan's opinions, but can write a fair and fine appreciation of his work nevertheless (*The Common Pursuit* [London, 1952], p. 206).

²⁶ *Juliana Oakley*, 7th ed. (London and Wellington, 1837), p. 98.

many incidents in the main narrative itself have a splendid drive and vigour. Little Henry's escapades, for example, whether he is chasing his magpie over the roof of the barn, being chased in his turn by Mr. Burke's bull, or falling into the trough of pig-swill and nearly drowning, are narrated with deceptive ease. Mrs. Sherwood interspersed her moral paragraphs with such incidents, full of action. When her characters are not pontificating about the unmitigated evil of the human heart and the need to be given a new nature by the Holy Spirit, they can talk. The conversations are excellently handled, particularly those between children. Few characters, however, emerge with any individuality, although their speech and actions are consistent.

Mrs. Sherwood also possessed undoubted powers of observation and description. Although the modern reader quickly tires of the book's romantic sentimentality (continual floods of tears, Tom Fairchild moaning by the grave of his cousin Ellen), he is held by the narrative detail. There are no purple patches, no set pieces of descriptive writing, but a clarity of detail throughout that remains in the memory.

On Saturday, Betty always made a fruit-pie, and baked it, and roasted a fowl or a joint of meat, to be cold the next day; so that she might have nothing to do, when she came from church on the Sunday, but to boil a few potatoes.

Mr. Crosbie was a very fat man, with a red face, yet he looked good-humoured, and had, in his younger days, been handsome. And, as the second sentence shows, Mrs. Sherwood wrote with a "buoyant good humour"²⁷ which shades into satire. Her crisp wit is fully in control. When the cattle-shed door is opened and little Henry is confronted by an infuriated bull,

The other two boys were, by the sudden opening of the door, forced behind it, so that the bull saw only Henry; but Henry did not stay to look at his fiery eyes or to observe the temper in which he lowered his terrible head to the ground and came forward. . . . He fell head-long on the new-shorn grass, and would have gotten no hurt whatever, had not his nose and his upper lip made too free with a good-sized stone.

The presentation of Mrs. Tilney, the superior lady's maid, is a satirical portrait of a higher order. Mrs. Sherwood's pleasing irony is not confined to her descriptions of the appearance and personality of her characters. *The Fairchild Family*, by its very nature, cannot equal the ironic finish of the short *Caroline Mordaunt*, "the only one of her works intended for adult readers which begins to approach Miss Austen's in style, in neatness, in humour, and in

²⁷ N. R. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

development of character",²⁸ but it includes many light touches, as, for example, where Bessy is said to be "gathering up all the little shreds of amusement which the streets of Reading somewhat sparingly afford."

Finally, this reference to the town in which she had received her formal education reminds us that Mrs. Sherwood writes about what she knows—of the places, the classes and the life she knows, and about the beliefs of which she is certain.²⁹ (It is only in her anti-Roman Catholic fiction that she displays a manifest ignorance of what she is describing.) She writes with transparent sincerity; whenever her own voice speaks it does so with patent honesty and real feeling. She sets her scenes, contrives her stories and manipulates her characters with the convinced firmness of personal experience.

Mrs. Sherwood wrote a very great number of books, for adults and children, for the middle class and for the poor. She published fiction and school books, a travel book and tracts. Her longest work is perhaps *The Lady of the Manor*, which totals nearly 700,000 words in its seven volumes; her shortest must be one of her penny booklets, something like the fifteen-page moral fable *The Fawns*, which inculcates kindness to animals. Although *The Fairchild Family* is the only one of her many works that is remembered today, *Little Henry and his Bearer* (written about 1814 while she was in India with her soldier-husband), *Susan Gray* and *Henry Milner* were all very popular in her lifetime. All her novels and tales, whatever their length, contain good things; they can be relied upon to present vigorous, vivid scenes and genuine dialogues. The moral is usually self-evident and explained only briefly in a paragraph or two. Say what you will about her doctrines, criticize her intrusive moralizing, expose the loose and rambling construction of her longer works—when you have finished, the fact remains that Mrs. Sherwood is not boring. Whether she is writing fiction or her autobiography, her narratives are lively, vivid and fresh—they communicate the first-hand, experienced, impressions of an essentially interesting mind.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²⁹ Unlike the other three writers (two clergymen and a "Bishop in petticoats"), Mrs. Sherwood's theology tended to take on fresh emphases from time to time. When she wrote *The Monk of Cimini* (1837?), for example, she gave clear evidence of her rejection of belief in the eternal punishment of the lost, and the novel seems to suggest that she had arrived at a version of universalism. This apart, however, her faith remained that of the evangelical school.

With Mrs. Sherwood we complete our survey of the original and formative period of evangelical fiction. Our concern throughout has been to demonstrate the essential nature of the work of each of the four writers, and for this reason our interest has been literary rather than historical, and critical rather than biographical. As a group of best-selling novels and tales, it perhaps needs to be repeated, they exercised great influence among the lower and middle classes, and succeeded in accomplishing the object for which they were produced. It is a pity that the religious novel of Victorian times, which derives directly from Hannah More, Legh Richmond, Rowland Hill and Mrs. Sherwood, should have become so stereotyped as to lose all life and interest. But this fact gives added importance to the books we have looked at, for, with the exception of *The Dairyman's Daughter*, they remain the most distinguished examples of a specialized literary form—the evangelical tale.

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