

JOHN OWEN - a short life and legacy

1. Background

*'Before the Reformation, there was only one Pope. After the Reformation, everyone with a Bible in his hand became a Pope.'*¹

John Owen lived from 1616 to 1683, through the Stuart era and the English Civil War. If the 16th century had been the century of the Reformation, the 17th century was to show how it would work out in England. Would there be just one Church of England? If it lasted, how and in what form would Catholicism be practised? What of the aspirations of all the radicals for a new, equal society, a theocracy on earth, with no Pope or King?

While the majority view in John Owen's day was that the country did not want a return to the papacy, there was no clear agreement on what Church or State should look like going forward, especially after the King was beheaded. Oxford was one place where the debate was to happen and few played a bigger role than John Owen.

2. The Early Years.

Born into a puritan family at Stadhampton in Oxfordshire, to where he retreated in his later years, Owen studied at Queen's College and in 1635 was ordained into the Church of England by the Bishop of Oxford. However, on the outbreak of Civil War he sided with Parliament and could not be anywhere near royalist Oxford. He became first a private chaplain, then a vicar in Essex where up to 2,000 attended to hear his expositions.

It should be explained that Puritanism was more of an outlook than a denomination. John Owen, while he had been ordained in the Church of England and to the end of his life thought there was little wrong with the 39 Articles, was a Congregationalist rather than Anglican or Presbyterian in his views on church governance. It is fair to say that the biggest (but not the only) components of Puritanism were Presbyterians on the one hand and Independents on the other, with Owen being an Independent. Puritan Oxford had a Baptist Mayor. In another part of the country, to take an example, the village of Eyam could have had a high church Anglican vicar, then replaced by Thomas Stanley the puritan vicar during the Cromwell years, then William Mompesson replaced him at the restoration of the monarchy.² It was messy, to say the least, and this was one of the problems.

3. The Cromwell Years.³

¹ Jordan Bajis, Common Ground, Minneapolis 1991 p.48

² Mompesson and Stanley had sufficient mutual respect and care for the people of Eyam to work together in the famous lockdown which prevented the spread of the plague in central England in 1666. In many parishes however, it would not have been so harmonious

³ Unless stated otherwise, all quotes relating to the period from the Protectorate onwards are from the Blair Worden article

John Owen came to Oliver Cromwell's attention for his preaching and won his friendship. Cromwell took him to Ireland and Scotland on his campaigns as a chaplain. After the beheading of Charles I on 30 January 1649, it was Owen who preached to Parliament the following day - somehow without mentioning the event.

Following the battle of Worcester and the formal end of the Civil War, Cromwell had twin objectives as Lord Protector and as the new Chancellor of Oxford University: the reformation of the country's institutions, religion and morality, and the reconciliation of the people of England. Cromwell saw no contradiction in these objectives. Furthermore, he understood the key role Oxford would play in training the pious ministers through whom both objectives would be realised at the local level. The man he chose for this vital job in Oxford was John Owen.

In 1651 Owen was appointed as dean of Christ Church, and the next year, as vice-Chancellor of the University. Wounds were sore. It was the University which had welcomed Charles and provided him with his capital from 1644 to 1646. Christ Church itself had been Charles I's residence, Merton had been the Queen's residence and St John's had been Prince Rupert's residence. The University had been on the losing side. There could have been few more influential roles in the country than being Vice-Chancellor of the University. It was also potentially a poisoned chalice. Great sensitivity and the ability to win respect would be needed. Owen appears largely to have brought both to the role. He was in his mid-30s.

There are two lesser known facts from the Cromwell years. Firstly, in 1654 Owen sat in Parliament as the MP for Oxford University. Secondly, in the same year, coffee came to Oxford, probably more to the delight of royalists than to puritans. The Queens Lane Coffee House, right opposite where Owen had been undergraduate, claims to have opened the same year.⁴

4. The Post Cromwell Years

In 1658 Cromwell died and in 1660 the monarchy was restored. At the news of the restoration, Oxford went '*perfectly mad*' and the University reverted to being a '*nursery of Baal's priests*' in the words of puritan critics.⁵

While this meant Owen losing his position in Oxford, he did not give up the roles he believed God had given him. From his home in Stadhampton he used his intellect to argue for the truths of the faith in his writings, and he worked through his powerful contacts to actively advocate freedom of conscience, the place of independent churches and the rights of dissenters in the new order.

He died in 1683, the same year as the Ashmolean museum was opened. He is buried in Bunhill Fields alongside dissenters such as John Bunyan, Daniel Defoe, William Blake, Susanna Wesley, Isaac Watts⁶ and David Nasmith⁷.

⁴ In fact, it claims not just to be the first coffee house in Oxford, or in England, but in Europe. Immediately opposite is a rival coffee shop claiming to be the oldest coffee house in England. The apparent contradiction is resolved by one of them not being continuous.

⁵ Blair Worden article

⁶ Who wrote 'When I survey the wondrous cross'

⁷ Founder of London City Mission, buried rather later than Owen in the 19th century

But what is his legacy?

5. Prince of Puritans

It is hard knowing his greatest legacy, but it is impossible to ignore the title of the 'Prince of Puritans' given to him by J I Packer. This is due to his theology. His preaching and writing were respected and debated at the highest levels. At a time of ferment, Owen argued for

- Calvinism and the depravity of man, against Arminianism and Socinianism
- The Trinity
- The classic Presbyterian view of infant baptism
- Congregational church governance, rather than Anglican or Presbyterian models, defending non-conformists from the accusation of schism
- Morality in public life, particularly after the Restoration
- The primacy of preaching. "The first and principal duty of a pastor is to feed the flock by diligent preaching of the word."

Two of his biggest works were on the book of Hebrews and the Holy Spirit.

Owen's entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography ends with this description: Owen was *'the leading proponent of high Calvinism in the 17th century.'*

6. Reformer and Reconciler

Was his role as Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University an impossible job? It reminds me of President Abraham Lincoln at the end of the later, American, Civil War, but a Civil War nonetheless. He had to reconcile defeated Confederate states and victorious Unionist states. Among other things, he moved the capital from Philadelphia to a newly created state Washington DC, carved out of Unionist Maryland and Confederate Virginia. Although from the North, he was unafraid to celebrate the 'Dixie' anthem of the South. I suspect he and Owen, both godly men of conscience, would have had similar quandaries.

Owen had been chosen by Cromwell to be a reformer and a reconciler. For Owen, the duty of the University was to *'defend ... and add new light to old truths.'* Puritanism had nothing to fear from learning. It did see real danger in fripperies which could lead to superstition and immorality. Why keep them if they posed risk to public morality and could not be justified on the basis they improved learning? Owen objected to *'boots, spurs and ribbons'*, to the wearing of mortar boards and hoods, the practice of Encaenia⁸ and to giving Colleges and churches 'holy names'. Was it too much too soon? Holding a University meeting on 25 December 1655 to ban mortar boards and hoods (deliberately so that those celebrating Christmas would not be present) backfired and led to a resurgence in both items, still worn to this day.

⁸ An annual celebration of Oxford's founders and benefactors

The Puritans within the University generally welcomed the University statutes, the problem not being the laws, but the lack of adherence to them. They looked for good men, rather than meddling to make the rules better, this reform not being a battle they would necessarily have won.

To start as they meant to go on, they first reformed the governing body of the University. Over 50% were Independents, including Owen and a colleague Thomas Goodwin at Magdalen College, together known as the '*Atlases of Independency*'. The rest were Presbyterians (who would generally side with the Independents) and lastly Anglicans.

Secondly, Parliament conducted three 'visitations' in support of reform during Owen's tenure - something like the modern Ofsted visit - intended to purge the more morally undesirable elements and allow the appointment of Puritan academics to key roles. Reform was needed - there was even a practice of selling college fellowships, rather than appointments being on merit.

Owen sometimes had a difficult battle opposing certain Puritan elements who regarded all learning with suspicion, as the enemy of 'grace and truth'. To what extent should the clever and popular teachers in the University be purged due to ungodly behaviour? In 1654 he actively had to face down opponents of orientalist John Pococke, regius Professor of Hebrew, a royalist and Anglican, whose learning, according to Owen, was admired by all the learned of not just England, but Europe. Another practice Owen tolerated, with difficulty, was 'Terrae Filius', an annual lecture in which a promising academic had free reign in what they said. The problem was that the freedom could be abused and descend into cruel and unnecessary lampoonery. Owen pulled down one lecturer who had not heeded his warnings and sent him to the Bocardo prison for going '*from clever dispute to vulgarity*'.

Owen stood up for the University over the appointment of the new Chancellor on Oliver Cromwell's death, which Cromwell's son Richard wanted to happen in Whitehall. Owen was quite clear it should happen in Oxford. When it was deserved, Owen punished Quakers without showing favouritism and in contrast, permitted Anglicans on occasion to gather for Holy Communion around the Book of Common Prayer.

7. Statesman

This role can only be understood against the backdrop of the Clarendon⁹ Code. This Code comprised four repressive laws which made life almost impossible for dissenting ministers and churches in the years following the Restoration¹⁰.

- The Corporation Act (1661) meant that all government office holders had to be Anglican
- The Act of Uniformity (1662) meant that non-Anglican ministers were not recognised. 2,000 ministers were evicted, so the Act became known as 'the Great Eviction'.
- The Conventicle Act (1664) banned dissenters' meetings.

⁹ The Clarendon Building, originally housing Oxford University Press, was named in honour of the same Earl of Clarendon, a benefactor, and his statue is on the side. Clarendon was a trusted adviser of both Charles I and Charles II. The adjoining building, the Sheldonian Theatre, was paid for by Lord Clarendon's friend Archbishop Gilbert Sheldon. Both men saw the world very differently from John Owen.

¹⁰ Understandably the Plague and then the Great Fire of London were seen by dissenters as God's judgment on these repressive rules.

- The Five Mile Act (1665) barred ex-ministers¹¹ living within five miles of their former congregations

Owen was prosecuted under the last two Acts but was saved from prison by friends in powerful positions. He declined invitations to become president of Harvard and Dutch universities, although it must have been tempting to leave this hostile environment. His objections to the Conventicle Acts were submitted to the House of Lords in 1670. Owen helped define what is understood nowadays as 'liberty of conscience', which is so important in a liberal democracy. Arguably, this is under threat in the 21st century with a new morality on the ascendancy which is no longer based on Judeo-Christian values (although growing out of them) e.g. prioritising equality over all other virtues.

Owen's fairness in this regard was recognised and respected. In 1674, King Charles II and his younger brother the Duke of York, later to be James II, entrusted Owen with 1,000 guineas to moderate some of the harshness of the new rules and help suffering dissenters. In June 1677, Owen procured a Court order releasing John Bunyan from Bedford gaol. He introduced Bunyan to his own printers to get *Pilgrims Progress*, written by Bunyan while in gaol, published, and is buried with Bunyan as mentioned previously.

8. The Person

As with so many other prominent men and women of the faith, personal life is where the vitality of a person's faith is most tested and it can be the most inspiring. Like a 17th century Job, he put up with great personal tragedy in his life. He was predeceased by all 12 of his children, 11 of whom died in infancy. One grew to adulthood and married, only to die shortly afterwards, leaving him no grandchildren. One can only imagine the testing time of his enforced withdrawal to Stadhampton aged 44, his fragile reforms of the University under threat, without the family through whom, in the normal course of things, a person like him might have had some consolation in a lonely time. His wife died later when he was 60.

What a delight then when a young man at Christ Church, of royalist pedigree stock like few others, risked parental disapproval to put himself at Owen's feet after he had left Oxford. 25 years Owen's junior, that man was William Penn. He was later to be the founder of Pennsylvania and to write the foundation documents of Quakerism and his portrait hangs in the Dining Hall of Christ Church. Were there others who became Owen's offspring of a spiritual kind?

Owen must have experienced the loneliness of leadership like few others. Criticised in his theological writings and making enemies on both sides of the divide as the 'tall poppy' in Oxford must have been bruising for him. One observer referred to him in 1677 as being prone to worrying about his health and '*crazy, often down*'. That was the year he married again, and he was only to live another six years.

His independence of thought and integrity also stand out. Although he supported Oliver Cromwell, he was never wholly Cromwell's man. I expect that godly conviction would have been in his favour and an attribute Cromwell saw and valued. Ordained in the Church of England, he moved to Presbyterianism and then to being a wholly independent Congregationalist. He does not appear to have been rigid in his application of the rules, believing allegiance to God's law was superior. He was

¹¹ The rules were not enforced against, for example, Thomas Stanley in Eyam. He stayed within the village and lived only a few hundred yard from the church.

neither liked by all Puritans nor by all University men. He was trusted by Kings. These words, said of Jesus by his critics in Mark 12:14, might have been said of Owen.

“Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.”

If so, I can’t think he would have wanted any higher praise.

9. Afterwards - and After That

John Foxe of Brasenose College attributed these words to the protestant martyr Hugh Latimer at his burning with Nicholas Ridley in Oxford in the ditch outside Balliol College in 1555. *‘Be of good comfort, Master Ridley and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle by God’s grace in England as I trust shall never be put out.’*

That candle has come under threat many times. No doubt Owen considered it under threat as he saw the portico to the Virgin Mary being added to the University church during the reign of Charles I, modelled on the high altar of St Peter’s in Rome designed by Bernini. Having sought to fan the flame during his time as vice-Chancellor, he would have been bitterly disappointed had he lived to see what happened when the openly catholic James II came to the throne. In 1687, shortly after Owen’s death, James sought to impose Anthony Farmer as president of Magdalen College, once the college of Owen’s dear friend and fellow Atlas of Independency, Thomas Goodwin. Farmer was a Catholic convert notorious for his debauched and promiscuous lifestyle. 25 dons were expelled in the fracas. In the end, James imposed Bishop Parker who, when asked for his theological views, said, those which *‘would help a man to keep a coach and six horses’* - exactly the rotten attitude which Owen had tried so hard to excoriate.

In contrast, how he would have celebrated when, in 1689, after the Glorious Revolution of William and Mary, the Act of Toleration finally granted freedom of worship to Owen’s beloved non-conformists.

What disappointment would have followed when, instead of the flame spreading, the ending of persecution and the prosperity of the Georgian era looked likely to suffocate the candle through sheer apathy in the University. That was until the beginning of the Holy Club at Christ Church. The arrival of John Wesley and George Whitefield at Oxford was part of the dawning of the 18th century revival. The irony that this should have happened at Oxford would not have been lost on Owen.

Owen’s living sacrifice in the 17th century, following the martyrdoms of Latimer and Ridley in the 16th, helped ensure by God’s grace the continuity of the flame in his generation in England.

Sources/for further reading

Cromwellian Oxford, Blair Worden, in the *History of the University of Oxford*, volume IV (17th century Oxford) edited by N. Tyacke

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