

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY CHRISTIAN LEADERS

J C RYLE



*Enquire, I pray thee, of the former age, and prepare thyself to the search of
their fathers.*

John 8:8

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PREFACE

The volume now in the reader's hands requires a few prefatory sentences of explanation. I should be sorry if there was any mistake as to its nature and intention.

It consists of a series of biographical papers, contributed to a monthly periodical (*The Family Treasury*) during the years 1866 and 1867. My object in drawing up these papers was to present the lives, characters, and work of the leading ministers by whose agency God was pleased to revive Christianity in England in the eighteenth century. I thought that the Church and the world ought to know something more than they seem to know about such men as Whitefield, Wesley, Romaine, Rowland, Grimshaw, Berridge, Venn, Toplady, Hervey, Walker, and Fletcher.

The Chapters were written from month to month in the midst of many ministerial engagements, under a pressure which none can understand but those who write for periodicals. To expect such a volume to be a model of finished composition would be absurd. I only lay claim to a tolerable degree of accuracy about historical facts. I have been careful to make no statement for which I could not find some authority.

The reader will soon discover that I am an enthusiastic admirer of the men whose pictures I have sketched in this volume. I confess

it honestly. I am a thorough enthusiast about them. I believe firmly that, excepting Luther and his Continental contemporaries and our own martyred Reformers, the world has seen no such men since the days of the apostles. I believe there have been none who have preached so much clear scriptural truth, none who have lived such lives, none who have shown such courage in Christ's service, none who have suffered so much for the truth, none who have done so much good. If anyone can name better men, he knows more than I do.

I now send forth this volume with an earnest prayer that God may pardon all its defects, use it for his own glory, and raise up in his Church men like those who are here described. Surely, when we look at the state of England, we may well say, "Where is the Lord God of Whitefield and of Rowland, of Grimshaw and of Venn? O Lord, revive thy work!"

J. C. Ryle, Stradbroke Vicarage, August 10, 1868.

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY CONTEXT

The subject I propose to handle in this volume is partly historical and partly biographical. I trust, however, that with most readers the subject I have chosen is one that needs no apology. The man who feels no interest in the history and biography of his own country is surely a poor patriot and a worse philosopher.

‘Patriot’ he cannot be called. True patriotism will make an Englishman care for everything that concerns England. A true patriot will like to know something about everyone who has left his mark on English character, from the Venerable Bede down to Hugh Stowell, from Alfred the Great down to Pounds, the originator of Ragged Schools.

‘Philosopher’ he certainly is not. What is philosophy but history teaching by examples? To know the steps by which England has reached her present position is essential to a right understanding both of our national privileges and our national dangers. To know the men whom God raised up to do his work in days gone by, will guide us in looking about for standard-bearers in our own days and days to come.

I venture to think that there is no period of English history which is so thoroughly instructive to a Christian as the middle of the eighteenth century. It is the period whose influence continued for a

long time. It is a period, not least, from which we may draw most useful lessons for our own times.

Let me begin by trying to describe the actual condition of England at the time. A few simple facts will suffice to make this plain.

The reader will remember that I am not going to speak of our political condition. The position of England was very different from what it is now. Great statesmen and orators there were among us, no doubt. But our standing among the nations of the earth was comparatively poor, weak, and low. Our voice among the nations of the earth carried far less weight than it has since obtained. The foundation of our Indian Empire had hardly been laid. Our Australian possessions were a part of the world only just discovered, but not colonized. At home there was a strong party in the country which still longed for the restoration of the Stuarts. In 1745 the Pretender and a Highland army marched from Scotland to invade England, and got as far as Derby. Corruption, cheating, and mismanagement in high places were the rule, and purity the exception. Civil and religious disabilities still abounded. To be a Dissenter—a Christian such as a Baptist or Congregationalist and not in the Church of England—was to be regarded as only one degree better than being seditious and a rebel. Bribery among all classes was open, unblushing, and profuse.

The reader will remember, furthermore, that I am not going to speak of our condition in a financial and economical point of view. Our vast cotton, silk, and linen manufactures had hardly begun to exist. Our enormous mineral treasures of coal and iron were scarcely touched. We had no steam-boats, no locomotive engines, no railways, no gas, no electric telegraph, no penny post, no scientific farming, no tarmac roads, no free-trade, no sanitary arrangements, and no police deserving the name. Let any Englishman imagine, if he can, his country without any of the things that I have just mentioned, and he will have some faint idea of the economical and financial condition of England in the eighteenth century.

But it is the religious and moral condition of England in the eighteenth century to which I shall confine my attention. The state