

BOOK REVIEW

Ian Bradley, *Breathers of an Ampler Day: Victorian Views of Heaven* (Durham, Sacristy Press, 2023) vii + 195 Pbk £14.99 ISBN 978-1-78959-291-7

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This is the third in a trilogy on death and the afterlife that Ian Bradley has been writing since he attained the age of ‘three score years and ten’ in 2020. The issues it raises have been on his mind for a long time. As an undergraduate at New College Oxford in 1968, Bradley unloaded his fears and doubts about the doctrine of eternal punishment to the assistant chaplain. The chaplain was Geoffrey Rowell, whose work *Hell and the Victorians* (1974) Professor Bradley draws upon here. It is a very personal book. He introduces readers to a range of Victorian poets, hymn writers and theologians who wrote about heaven, and focusses on the types of (mainly Anglican and Scottish Presbyterian) liberal Protestants that he finds most congenial. He has planned for several of the hymns discussed in the book to be used at his own funeral. The book is informative and thought-provoking. Bradley wears knowledge acquired over many decades lightly, serving it up in a sequence of short chapters, with lavish amounts of quotations from the authors discussed.

He begins with an introductory chapter that outlines the Victorians’ overwhelming concern with death and the afterlife. The main directions of change are sketched out, with a ‘benevolent universalism’ largely replacing traditional teachings on the everlasting punishment of the wicked, and ideas derived from Spiritualism encouraging the belief that the spirits of the deceased moved straight into a spirit land to be with departed loved ones, rather than slumbering in the grave until a day of general resurrection. The result was ‘a much more anthropocentric notion of heaven, where the emphasis was on sociability, community and personal interaction and development’ (p.12). Subsequent chapters proceed with analyses of particular texts that helped to develop Victorian ideas about heaven and illustrate change. Some writers, such as Christina Rossetti, John Henry Newman and Alfred Tennyson are well known, and it is a line from *In Memoriam* that supplies the book’s title. Others, such as Adelaide Anne Proctor and John Ellerton are less known. Newman’s *Dream of Gerontius* ‘much darker and more frightening than most of the other Victorian sources discussed in this book’ (p.131) is included as a counterweight to the liberal Protestantism, and Bradley points out that it says little about heaven. The chapter on F.D. Maurice, whom Bradley regards as ‘the greatest ever British theologian’ (p.90) is particularly informative. Maurice is famous for

being sacked from King's College London for denying the doctrine of eternal punishment in 1853, but his ideas on the afterlife, which were published in the following decade, are less well known. Maurice shifted the dial on the Victorian vision of heaven, maintaining the notion of heavenly reunion with family and friends, whilst reframing it as a place of activity and self-improvement, and boldly suggesting that eternity was a quality of experience with God, rather than a matter of temporal duration. He took the hopeful view that heaven was the destination of the vast majority. Maurice's ideas, taken up by various disciples, began to penetrate Anglican thought more broadly in the years after his death. Later chapters consider the ways in which writers and preachers plundered the natural world to draw on analogies derived from physical and biological decay and regeneration to explain death and its aftermath. The perspectives of free thinkers, some of whom struggled to give up the idea of heaven, are also discussed.

I wondered about the intended audience for this book. It will be useful for Victorianists but would have been more so if it had had an index. Bradley makes his intention clearer in the closing pages. In his concluding chapter, he outlines the extent to which theologians in the twentieth century either minimised the significance of the afterlife or lost interest in it entirely. But Bradley senses a revival of interest in the afterlife at the present time, and a shortage of Christian resources with which to respond. He hopes that the Victorian authors featured in his book might enjoy a new lease of life today, serving as guides for those who are curious about the afterlife.

Could they though? Given the hints and contradictions contained in scripture, the Victorian conception of heaven was inevitably a work of imaginative speculation, influenced, as Bradley shows, by the prevailing trends in Victorian theology and culture, such as the waning belief in hell, and the rise of the social gospel. The sugar rush of sentimentality and earnestness that shaped much of the Victorians' social heaven, whether it involved literal family reunions or strenuous self-improvement, was surely one reason why theologians and many Christian believers in the twentieth century drew back from saying anything very much at all. Death is certainly less of a taboo than it was a few decades ago, but the current response to it strikes me as a patchwork from many sources. Some ideas favoured by the Victorians undeniably live on in the popular imagination, such as that dead babies and small children become angels, but so too do ideas derived from Humanism and Eastern religions. Ian Bradley has provided an interesting and valuable survey of Victorian views of heaven, but I am less convinced than he is about their application in the present day.

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