

The purpose of this article is to study the outlook on Catholicism of Sir John Acton, later Lord Acton the famous historian, when he was living in Shropshire as a young bachelor. During his boyhood the provision of a chaplain had been arranged with the Bishop by his mother, Lady Granville.

A certain light is thrown on Acton's religious approach by an account of his dealings with the chaplains who served Aldenham between his coming of age and the final closing of the chapel. During the eighteenth century such chaplaincies, which were then at the hub of Catholic rural life, had been for the most part served either by the religious orders or by some relative or dependent of the squire's family. With the development of the big industrial populations, it became harder to obtain a suitable priest for work of an increasingly restricted scope. There were certain exceptional cases, like Wardour Castle, where the Jesuits had agreed to make a permanent provision. Aldenham, however, normally depended on the priests available in that section of the old Midland District.

At this time the Aldenham appointment had a quite special significance. Lord and Lady Granville had now retired to London and the priest chosen would be the daily companion of the young baronet, who lived at Aldenham when in the country. It would, therefore, appear that the Bishop of Shrewsbury had allowed Acton to make his own suggestion.

Sir John Acton's first appointment seemed almost too good to be true. The priest chosen was of the highest standing and had gained his new patron's sympathy when teaching him for a few months during his school days at Oscott. The Very Reverend John Brande Morris was at this time forty-three years of age and had recently been installed as a Canon of Plymouth, when the new chapter had been erected. During the past three years he had acted as chaplain to Edmund Rodney Pollexfen Bastard, Esquire, of Kitley and Ashburton Court in the county of Devon, a wealthy and extravagant young landowner who had recently submitted to the Roman obedience. Canon Morris had been an undergraduate at Balliol with Frederick William Faber, who remained until death his closest friend. His career had had a distinguished opening and he had held the posts of Petrean Fellow of Exeter College, Lecturer in Syriac in the University and assistant to Dr Pusey in the chair of Hebrew. He had been received with cordiality and respect by the senior Catholic clergy of the West Country. 'We hailed him', wrote Canon Oliver, 'as an ornament and luminary of our body'. Before he followed Faber to Rome he had been a member of Mark Pattison's then circle. In 1843 he had received an award from the Bishop of Calcutta for the best method of proving the truth of Christianity to the Hindus.

On the other hand as against these advantages he was touchy and impecunious, and engaged at the moment in attempting to raise a loan from James Hope-Scott.

His life was starred with quarrels. He had left Kitley as the result of a complicated series of disputes. 'Matters did not run' explains Canon Oliver in his courtly way, 'so comfortably and smoothly for him at Yealhampton as we could have wished.' His principal enemy there was a Mrs Orleans, presumably the housekeeper. He was of course at this period unused to the status of a priest in a large household. He had offered himself to other patrons, to Mr Murray at Danesfield and to Colonel Leslie, K.H., of Fetternear, an aged Catholic *roué*. Father Faber, who has left so many letters addressed to Morris, has a characterization of him. 'Voluntas Dei', he wrote, 'You rascal! Do you think yr. sunshiny old phiz, & yr. eternal laugh can be in anybody's way.' A 'sunshiny old phiz' was not an object that was likely to make much appeal to Sir John Acton.

Faber at that time had no especial reason to be reserved with Acton, but his instinct was to be wary and he knew that Morris's departure from his diocesan (Dr Errington) had been stormy. 'I am', he wrote in a note which throws a vivid light on the arrival of the new chaplain at Aldenham, 'nonplussed about you. I did not understand the Bishop of Plymouth's letter to you as you did. It seemed to me nothing beyond expression of kindness and regret. On the whole I *incline* to silence.' He then turned to his friend's own position. 'Would nor Sir J. do up a priest's house for any one? & must not the chapel be done up? As to victuals, you are acting as chaplain. *Silence*, if you can.' This was not a very encouraging beginning.

As it happens there is another account of Morris, from a very different angle and a rather earlier time, in Mark Pattison's *Memoirs*. 'I became', so begins this passage, 'a declared Puseyite, then an ultra-Puseyite; I saw a great deal of men like Jack Morris, whose whole conversation was turning the Church of England into ridicule, and who adopted as their motto "Tendimus in Latium."'. Jack Morris, however, took me by my student's side. He passed his whole day up the tower of Exeter College reading the Fathers'. It was this massive if unbalanced learning, at which Father Faber never hints, which made an appeal to Acton.

Jack Morris had in fact two qualities which at first appealed to his young patron, a multifarious although ill-assorted erudition and a cheerful mockery of Dr Newman which went with a low esteem for the new hierarchy. Such pretensions to learning as these prelates possessed were torn to shreds; this was a process which John Acton found grateful as they sat beside the fire at Aldenham. In other respects the two men had less in common. Morris had an unrequited liking for the Catholic gentry. He had been for a time tutor with Mr Simon Scrope of Danby; he also had a tendency to interfere. It should be explained that so many details of his life are known because he seems to have kept every letter that he received from Fr Faber. Those preserved in the London Oratory number one hundred and ninety-two; the other side of this corre-

spondence has not survived.

In the early days of Morris's chaplaincy at Aldenham the name of Faber, the superior of the Oratory, had power with Acton. Thus Döllinger was sent to call on him in the autumn of 1858 at the end of his Shropshire visit. Later these feelings were changed, and in particular Faber was affronted by Döllinger's article tracing back the origin of Jansenism to St Augustine. At the same time the work on which the chaplain was engaged was not likely to win the sympathy of his young patron. Part of his time was devoted to a translation of *The Months of May and November* from the Italian of Fr Alphonsus Muzzarelli, S.J., but the labour to which he gave most attention was a verse drama in four acts entitled *Telectha Koommee* or 'The Gospel prophecy of our Lady's Assumption'. This last work proved to be a forewarning of his later preoccupations.

Acton gave his view about this book in a letter sent to Richard Simpson on 25 July 1858. 'Jack Morris' poem is out, full of atrocious theology. If you mean to expose him (in the *Rambler*), do it at once, when I'm away, 1st September.' He also made another reference in a letter written after Mass one Sunday at Aldenham some two months later. He had sat in the tribune as was his duty. 'Jack Morris', he noted, 'has just preached about our Lady – that "we ought to pray for a fervid desire of leaning on those beautiful breasts".' Both these reflections suggest a curious attitude on the part of the young baronet towards the middle-aged priest who was his chaplain. There is no evidence that Canon Morris ever cared for Sir John Acton. He would not settle down, would not unpack. His mind went back to Kitley, where Edmund Bastard was now dead. He thought he might go back to help his young successor. An offer from Faber to try to get him a post at 'Primate Cullen's new University' did not appeal.

Morris was homely, pious and bawdy; this was not a trinity of qualities that Acton liked. It was the last matter which proved his undoing. Apparently it was a question of dubious stories and an old-fashioned and gentlemanly coarseness which would be accepted in an Oxford common room with its eighteenth century tradition, but would not be tolerated in a Tridentine seminary. Faber made it evident that there had been complaints about this matter at Oscott and that Morris could not return to St Edmund's for the same reason. A Catholic gentleman of strict opinions had refused to have him staying in the house. At the same time his light-hearted expressions were not liked; it did not amuse Acton to hear him referring to Bishop Burgess as Bishop Purges.

Still this situation dragged along; nor was it modified until Lady Granville died, when Acton decided to take up the question of Jack Morris's tenure. The following letter from the Shrewsbury diocesan archives is worth printing almost *in extenso*. It is clear that it had been preceded by some conversations about Canon Morris. The Bishop of Shrewsbury had also asked Sir John to build a Catholic school near

Aldenham. The reply was sent from London and dated 22 May 1860; a preliminary paragraph dealt with the parliamentary and other labours and the business which had devolved on Acton through his mother's death.

'My dear Lord,

I had hoped until the very last moment I should be able to come down and receive you at Aldenham, and was very unwilling to find myself obliged to give it up. I must, as I have so often done, trust to your tried indulgence to forgive my very great discourtesy. You speak of several things on which I should have been most anxious to confer with you, and which have very much occupied my thoughts.

With reference to the school I believe Mr Morris is somewhat misinformed, judging from what your Lordship says. When I came of age it was one of the first questions to which I addressed myself, and in which I endeavoured most carefully to obtain the highest authority and advice, and to act most strictly in obedience to your wishes . . . Your Lordship is probably not aware that the new school at Morville was not only largely aided by me at first, but is still supported by me, moderately indeed, because it is little or at all visited by Catholic children. It would therefore be a breach of contract (Morville having been founded for both Catholics and Protestants) for me to set up a school drawing away Catholics from Morville school, just as it would if it were to have an essentially Protestant character.

Canon Morris has never appeared to take the slightest interest in the school. From his extreme sensitiveness of feeling and obstinacy of opinion I have very rarely ventured to remonstrate with him about anything. Yet these things of which you speak have been a continual source of apprehension and distress to me. The openness and coarseness with which things hardly alluded to among Christians were constantly discussed in his sermons and in catechizing children were really alarming. It not only awakened the curiosity of young people, and tore away the veil from their imagination but habituated all the congregation to hear the most sacred things, and our Lady in particular, associated with ideas hardly ever expressed out of a medical school. I should never contemplate with any peace of mind Mr Morris staying at Aldenham after my marriage. Yet I cannot take any steps to hasten his movements. He has never considered himself settled, has never unpacked his books, and has refused to allow alterations to be made which he wished for at first but desisted from when he thought he should not stay. Once he wrote to me a couple of years ago saying it must be awkward for me to have a chaplain always on the move and asking whether he had not better go at once. I answered . . . that I should take no steps to supply his place until he announced to me the date of his intended removal. This he has never done.'

This concludes the significant portion of the letter. Sir John Acton left the next

move to Bishop Brown. Before closing he states that by his mother's death 'some money which had become totally disconnected with the diocese of Shrewsbury and paid its ecclesiastical tribute by other channels' naturally reverted and that he hoped he should be in a position where he might do something more than hitherto for the material support of religion. It is a curious letter with its refusal to change his position about the school; stately as if from one power to another; full of a laden Baroque courtesy. The point about the marriage was interesting, for this did not then take place. The bishop and the squire were in agreement. What was to become of John Brande Morris?

We can see the position as Faber saw it. He gave out his views in staccato notes, each one addressed to his 'Dearest Jack'. 'Laid up up here at Sydenham with a fit of gravel . . . Don't know enough about Bernard Smith or his intimacy with you, don't believe you will ever go back to Plymouth, think you wd. be more comfortable under Northampton than Shrewsbury. Not in a condition to say more. Obligated to dictate this. Most affectly, F. W. F.' Each bishop rigidly controlled his area and Faber would give the territorial titles, which to most Englishmen would sound odd and unreal.

The summer was passing and he wrote again. 'Indeed my memory did not need jogging; for I constantly think of you and your uncomfortable position . . . I have not been able to hear of any place for you. But I can do nothing amongst bishops. Tho' we have not stirred hand or foot in these rows, & have certainly no particular cause to fight the C(ardinal)'s battles who has never fought one of ours, yet we are considered his men, & Talbot tells me that all the bishops, Nottingham (Roskell) excepted, were agst the Cardinal. So you see I've no interest on the *bench*. Why not pick out a diocese, & write & ask the Bp. if he'll accept your services for the present. Plymouth it appears won't have you. So *for the present* that is closed. They want you away at Aldenham.'

Later he returned to the same subject. 'I hardly know a bishop to recommend to you. We converts are sadly out of favour everywhere just now. Dr Errington gave very triste accts. of us at Rome. I don't believe we have any friend but the Cardinal & he's a languid and oblivious one. Still priests are very rare, & men of your gifts must be a Godsend to many bishops . . . *Anyhow* it seems you must act *now*. I suppose they want you away before Acton's marriage'. The third letter to 'Dearest Jack' was sent from the Oratory on September 19th. 'I dread yr going (to a convent chaplaincy) if it be to mope & be sad. Yet on the other hand *where* are you to go to? And matters are urgent'. He offered to enquire about Blandford Square, that is about the convent there.

'Finally, Morris was taken in at Downside. 'I am glad all is going on well and I shall be more glad when you get amongst those kind hearted monks at Downside.' Morris was destined to stay for a time at the mission of Shortwood, near Temple Cloud in

Somersetshire, then for two years he acted as chaplain to Coventry Patmore at Heron's Ghyll. The last twelve years of his life were passed as chaplain to the convent of the *Soeurs de Miséricorde* at Queen Caroline Street in Hammersmith. It was during this time that Father Faber died. Canon Morris was a lonely convert and in his last years increasingly eccentric. He spent his time in weighing the movements of the Blessed Sacrament in Paradise; he studied whether it might not rest in Mary's bosom. He looked for a D.D. from Rome, which never came. Although he did not return to Aldenham it seems that he left a mark on Acton's mind. One comment made about him by Faber sticks in the memory. 'You had always some little screw loose at Oxford.'

The successor whom the Bishop of Shrewsbury chose for Mr Morris was to exercise a considerable but subdued influence on Acton's life. For one thing the priest now chosen was to stay for twenty-three years at Aldenham. Mr Thomas Green at the time of his appointment was only well advanced in middle age, but he struck the patron as already venerable. Two or three quotations will serve to outline the position. They all come from letters written to Richard Simpson. 'English', wrote Acton in 1861, 'has been in this neighbourhood and met old Green, whom the bishop put here as the gravest of his old priests to keep me in order.' Another letter touches on the chaplain's arrival. 'Old Green is knocked completely off his legs by the new world opened out before him when he expected that we were going to make everything comfortable.' In the early years of their association Sir John Acton got to know his chaplain well. They spent the Christmas at Aldenham alone together and there is a light-hearted reference to him as 'Verdant' in one of the patron's letters.

Mr Green was some sixty-two years of age and came of a middle-class family in the neighbourhood of Birmingham. His closest relative appears to have been William Green of Victoria Place, Cragoe Street, in that city, who is described as a retired tradesman. The details of Mr Green's career make it clear that he had passed a lifetime of service in the chaplaincies and rural parishes maintained by the surviving Catholic squires in Shropshire and in Staffordshire.

A letter to Richard Simpson will explain how the first phase of Mr Green's long chaplaincy came to an end. 'I have had', wrote Acton in August 1863, 'the house (at Aldenham) full of guests . . . and I have effected a revolution in the management of the estate involving an immediate increase of rent – besides all of which I am obliged to take care of poor old Green, who has had a paralytic stroke.' Henceforward Mr Green was noted as a priest of good character, who had had a stroke. Life was quiet at Aldenham, the pastoral work could well be easy there. For many years there would be no change in the chaplaincy at Sir John Acton's home.

Note. The quotations from letters in this article are from unpublished MSS in the London Oratory, Downside and the Shrewsbury diocesan archives.