

THE ELECT LADY

By

GILBERT W. KIRBY

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COUNTESS OF HUNTINGDON'S CONNEXION

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COMMENDATION

by

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Horace Walpole described Lady Huntingdon as the St. Teresa of the Methodists. Her focal position in the evangelical awakening of the eighteenth century is being increasingly recognised by historians and we are indebted to Gilbert Kirby, former Principal of the London Bible College, for his reminder of her significance. It will be appreciated by a readership extending far beyond the immediate circle of the Countess's Connexion.

A. SKEVINGTON WOOD.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We are indebted to the Cheshunt Foundation, Westminster College, Cambridge for permission to reproduce the portrait by P. Soldi of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, on the cover.

EDITORIAL NOTE TO THE NEW EDITION

For the past thirty years this popular little book has been an invaluable resource for many who have wanted information about the Countess of Huntingdon and her Connexion.

It was first published in 1972 then, in 1990, a revised edition was issued and now, due to further demand, another edition is necessary. In preparing this edition, however, numerous amendments and corrections have been made, and some sections have been rewritten, partly to take account of the changes that have taken place in the Connexion in Britain and in Sierra Leone. Even so, the intention has not been to document recent developments in any detail. A full history of the Connexion, bringing the story right up to the present, has yet to be written. Sadly, the Connexion in Britain, at least, has considerably fewer churches and members than when Gilbert Kirby's book was first published. Conversely, it is encouraging that in Sierra Leone, despite the recent civil war, the Connexion there is once more growing in strength and numbers.

Since the second edition of *The Elect Lady*, two major books on the Countess and her Connexion in her time have been written by Dr. Edwin Welch and Dr. Boyd Stanley Schlenker, respectively, which will, no doubt, be standard works on eighteenth century Connexional history for years to come. These are included in the Bibliography.

Both books are based on an extensive list of primary and secondary sources, some of which have not previously been used. They also give ample footnotes and references to those sources. However, although more erudite than many previous accounts of the Countess's life, the former is essentially factual and the latter is unduly critical of the Countess's character and methods. Edwin Welch, formerly Assistant Librarian of Cambridge University and Archivist of the Cheshunt Foundation, was uniquely placed to do the original research which is evident throughout his book and the Connexion is greatly indebted to him for this and for other works on various aspects of Connexional history. Nevertheless, the present treatise will undoubtedly continue to meet the needs of those inside and outside the Connexion who want a concise account of the important spiritual contribution the Countess and her Connexion have made to the gospel and Church of Christ at Home and Abroad. For those who wish for a more extended account, also resourced from primary as well as secondary sources and ably written from a sympathetic, evangelical viewpoint, a further major book by Faith Cook has recently been published. In addition, any serious study of Connexional history in the eighteenth century will be helped by the recent republishing of the two volumes of *The Life and Times of Selina Countess of Huntingdon*, by A. C. H. Seymore or Seymour, published in 1839. Despite being discounted by many historians as unreliable, as well as sycophantic, it remains invaluable as a mine of information on the period it covers, and all subsequent biographers of Selina have been indebted to it. These two works are also included in the bibliography.

Thanks are due to Mrs Margaret Staplehurst, the Connexional Archivist, for a number of suggested amendments. We are also grateful to Mrs Staplehurst, Mr Ken Stone, Mr Michael Ward and Dr Brenda Baldwin for contributing to the updated chapter 10. The Rev. Ben Quant made the task of revision much easier by providing the entire text of the former edition in computer format and helped solve several computer problems in the process.

Norman Lloyd

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FOREWORD

There has been a good deal of discussion among Biblical scholars as to the identity of the "elect lady", to whom John, the elder, addressed his second letter. One commentator goes out of his way to point out that, in his view, she was no "prehistoric Countess of Huntingdon". Some suggest that John does not have any one person in mind but that he is, in fact, personalising some local church. Be that as it may, we can think of no more apt description of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, than "elect lady". As for "her children", all of us who stand in the true evangelical tradition may, to some extent, claim that title for ourselves.

The name of the Countess is perpetuated in that her Connexion still exists, even though it comprises but a few churches. In Sierra Leone, the Connexion is recognised as one of the historic Christian denominations, and the Countess herself is held in the highest esteem.

The early biographies of the Countess - *The Life and Times of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon* in two volumes and *The Coronet and the Cross*, by A. H. New, have long since been out of print, but I have drawn freely from them.

The Countess of Huntingdon was a truly remarkable woman. She was a product of, and contributed to, the religious revival of the eighteenth century, and she ranks alongside John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield and many others.

As an early convert of the Revival, she soon began to display a deep concern for the spiritual and social needs of her contemporaries. Servants in her own household, on the one hand, and members of the aristocracy including the Royal Family, on the other, came within the sphere of her influence and concern. She used the weight of her exalted position to full effect.

She is particularly remembered as the founder of a denomination and of a training College, but that had never been her original intention. Until 1781, her chapels were societies within the Church of England and her College was founded primarily to train men for itinerant evangelism, preferably with Episcopal ordination.

This slim volume makes no pretensions to being an exhaustive work - it is simply an outline of the main events in the life of one of the greatest Christian women of all time, put forth with the conviction that, "she being dead, yet speaks".

To those who might question the value of such a book, in view of the fact that the subject matter relates to the eighteenth century, and we are now in the twenty-first, we would simply say that nature has not changed, nor has human need. What God did do through the consecrated labours of this "elect lady", He can still do through men and women who are prepared to lay their all on the altar.

It is fascinating to compare and contrast life in the eighteenth century with that in this modern age. In days of jet travel, for example, we may smile at an announcement made, in 1757, of a "Flying Coach": "Incredible as it may seem, the coach will actually, barring accidents, arrive in London in four and-a-half days after leaving Manchester." Those were the days of highwaymen and footpads. The heaths round London swarmed with them, and no man rode alone if he could help it. The eighteenth century could justly be described as an age of brutality and of violence. In those days men battered each other with honest fists, not with guns or even flick-knives. Much of the brutality stemmed from excessive drinking -

intoxication was so common that it passed in every class of society without comment. It was said of one celebrated member of the Episcopal bench that he was, "always sober as a bishop though frequently drunk as a lord".

Eighteenth century Christianity prior to the spiritual awakening has been somewhat cynically described as "Mohammedanism without Mohammed". The descendants of the Puritans had lost their way. Unitarianism was prevalent in many non-conformist circles. Many of the bishops were more interested in fox hunting than in the spiritual well-being of their flock. In 1738, the Archbishop of Canterbury bemoaned the "open and professed disregard of religion". A church bell was struck with the inscription, "Hurrah for the Church of England and down with enthusiasm!" Carlyle was not far wrong when he summed up the situation with the epigrammatic comment: "Soul extinct, stomach well alive". The eighteenth century was a period of dim ideals and of expiring hopes. Corruption in public life was all too common. Coarse jokes and foul speech were characteristic not only of the stage, but also of life generally. The immorality that obtained in Court circles was a byword.

To be reminded of all this when one is living in an age of excessive permissiveness is cold comfort, and yet we are encouraged to know that the God who gave spiritual revival in times past, when the outlook was so dark, is the same God to whom we cry for revival today. Furthermore, we may reasonably expect that, in any future awakening, there will be raised up, as of old, consecrated men such as John Wesley and George Whitefield and, who knows, a modern counterpart of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon!

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CHAPTER 1

EARLY YEARS

In many respects the world into which Selina Shirley was born was very different from our own yet, spiritually and morally, the state of affairs in England in the eighteenth century was not unlike that to which we are accustomed. Distinctions between rich and poor, learned and ignorant were, of course, far more sharply defined two or three centuries ago. The aristocracy enjoyed a position as of right, which is certainly not accorded to them today. Spiritually, however, the situation then and now seems remarkably similar. Voltaire wrote: "There is only just enough religion left in England to distinguish Tories who have little, from Whigs who have none". Montesquieu went so far as to say, "There is no religion in England. Everyone laughs if one talks of it" and, he added, "In France I pass for having too little religion; in England for having too much". One writer comments:

Historians of the Christian Church consider that one of the gloomiest epochs in its history was that which preceded the advent of what is known as the Methodist Revival. It was an age when antichrist seemed to be at the zenith of its power. The intellectual classes were enveloped in the blighting atheism of Voltaire, while the masses of the people were under the dominion of ignorance and brutality.

In certain respects it was an age of startling contrasts - the nobility were building large and gracious houses, whilst the poor lacked almost every necessity of life. In all classes, drunkenness, sexual promiscuity, gambling and many other social evils, were much in evidence.

Selina Shirley was born into the nobility. She came from a distinguished family that could trace its ancestry back to the days of Edward the Confessor. F. F. Bretherton wrote: "The blood of emperors, kings, princes, dukes and earls mingled in this illustrious family." The house of Shirley was certainly held in high esteem. Selina's grandfather, Sir Robert Shirley, had been created Viscount Tamworth and Earl Ferrers in 1711. Selina's father, born in 1677, had been named Washington Shirley, after his mother, the daughter and heiress of Lawrence Washington, Esq., of Caresden, Wiltshire. Selina's mother was Mary, eldest daughter of a distinguished lawyer, Sir Richard Levinge, Solicitor General for Ireland and Speaker of the House of Commons. Her father succeeded to his father's titles in 1717, ten years after Selina was born.

Lady Selina Shirley first saw the light of day on August 24th 1707, at Astwell House, now Astwell Castle, on one of the Shirley's Northamptonshire estates. It is claimed that, up to the beginning of the twentieth century, visitors were shown the room where she born. Little is known of her childhood, but there is evidence that she and her two sisters were brought up partly at Staunton Harold, for many years the English seat of the Shirley family, and partly in Ireland, on the Shirley family estates at Carrickmacross, in County Monaghan, where her family spent considerable periods of time. The home at Staunton Harold was an imposing mansion. It stood in some 150 acres of well-wooded parkland. The grounds had been laid out with exquisite taste and, in them, was a large ornamental lake, crossed by a handsome stone bridge. Adjoining the house was the family's private chapel, with its many tablets and monuments commemorating Selina's distinguished forebears. Living conditions at Carrickmacross, however, where the family were familiar visitors, were undoubtedly more Spartan. The castle had been made uninhabitable during the English Civil War, in 1641, and

a house there was not built for the family until about 1750. Also, until her father succeeded to the title Earl Ferrers, he had to support his family on the pay of a junior army officer and, even afterwards, he had financial difficulties, and had to mortgage some estates to pay for Selina's dowry.

At the tender age of nine, an episode took place that had a profound effect upon Selina. Already a sensitive and serious-minded child, she was greatly touched by the sight of a funeral cortege, in which the body of a child about her own age was being carried to the grave. She followed the procession and listened intently to the words of the funeral service. A lasting impression was made upon her young mind, so much so that she would frequently make her way to that lonely churchyard and visit the child's grave. Shortly after this experience, her own family suffered a bereavement, through the death of Shirley's grandfather on Christmas Day 1717.

Selina was very often to be found on her own in prayer. She realised, even at a tender age, something of the peculiar temptations to be associated with one born in her station of life. One could describe her, even as a child, as "God-fearing" to an unusual degree.

As one would expect, Selina's education was directed towards equipping her to take her place in society. Such matters as good manners and deportment were considered of primary importance. At the same time, she revealed an extraordinarily quick brain and a particularly retentive memory. Selina was a highly intelligent young woman by any standards, with unusual powers of perception and observation. She was brilliant in her assessment of character and in her penetrating analysis of a situation.

Although not beautiful, Selina possessed an innate charm and was commanding in appearance. Her eyes were expressive and her forehead bore witness to her intellectual capacity. To quote the words of her biographer, A. N. New, in *The Coronet and the Cross*: "There was a serene tranquillity, sometimes shaded with a tinge of sadness, depicted on her countenance, which was rarely disturbed by outward events."

Court life for a girl born into a noble family might well have held a strong fascination but, in the case of Selina, she was far from enamoured. She played her part in society functions, attended various fashionable parties in Kensington in company with her contemporaries, but she would much prefer to find some secluded spot where she might read her Bible undisturbed. For a young woman she was very serious-minded and somewhat nauseated by the tawdriness of much that went on in "high society" at the time.

On June 3rd 1728, Selina Shirley was married to Theophilus, the ninth Earl of Huntingdon. Her home at Staunton Harold was midway between the town of Ashby-de-la-Zouch and Donnington Park, the family seat of the Huntingdons. She had, from a child, prayed that she might marry into a "serious" family, and it seemed as though her prayers were answered. The Earl of Huntingdon belonged to the House of Hastings, a family notable for their close links with royalty. Theophilus, the ninth Earl, was the second son of the seventh Earl of Huntingdon by his second marriage, and was born at Donnington Park on November 12th 1696. As he grew up, he revealed his capacity for learning, and he spent a good deal of time travelling through various European countries. He studied at Oxford University and developed "a taste as elegant, and judgement as sound, as perhaps any man in Europe". The Earl tended to shun public life, although he did carry the Sword of State at the Coronation of King George II. He was essentially a home-lover, naturally modest and retiring. One writer stated:

In birth, rank and wealth, his claims exceeded hers. He could boast royal descent through a long line of noble ancestors, for the family sprang from a Plantagenet prince, that Duke of Clarence who was brother to Edward IV.

By her marriage, therefore, Lady Selina came even more into contact with Society and the Court circle.

There seems no doubt that the union of Lady Selina Shirley and Theophilus, Earl of Huntingdon, was a love match. They proved to be a devoted couple. He recognised in his wife outstanding qualities of character and she, in turn, had a deep and abiding affection for her husband. They lived at Donnington Park, in the ancient mansion that stood in the midst of parkland, boasting some splendid old oak trees. Selina's position as Countess of Huntingdon required that she should move in high society, although the gay and the frivolous held little attraction for her. She was always relieved to return from London to the quiet seclusion of Donnington Park. Whereas in London she had to mingle with the high and mighty she was able, in the country, to seek out the poor and under-privileged, and give them her attention. She took a keen interest in the welfare of all who served on the family estate, seeking to meet their material needs, as well as being ready to give spiritual counsel. She became known as the "Lady Bountiful" to the grateful recipients of her favours.

Lady Huntingdon cultivated her friendship with her aunt, Lady Fanny Shirley. Lady Fanny had been renowned for her beauty, and had graced the courts of George I and George II. At her villa, in Twickenham, she entertained the cream of society, particularly some of the outstanding literary figures of the day. Pope acknowledged a birthday gift Lady Fanny had given him by composing a poem in her honour. She frequently entertained Lord Chesterfield and Lord Bolingbroke, and Lady Huntingdon also came to know them intimately, through meeting them at her aunt's house.

Selina could number the great composer Handel among her friends. Handel often conducted private concerts at the residences of the nobility, and he visited Donnington Park for that purpose. She made the acquaintance of several other notable musicians of the day, including Giardini and Giordini. Both these men, at the request of the Countess, composed several hymn tunes that were later used in her chapels.

Lady Huntingdon also showed an active interest in some of the political issues of the day. On one occasion she and several other ladies of rank forced their way into the House of Lords, in order to hear a debate concerning Spanish encroachments on English property.

In today's language, Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, was, at this stage in her life, an inveterate "do-gooder". She delighted in her "good works" and derived a considerable degree of satisfaction from them. She was deeply religious but, as yet, she knew nothing of a spiritual conversion. To quote the words of the Apostle, at this point in life she was eagerly "going about to establish her own righteousness". She had not yet come to realise that men and women are "saved by grace, through faith", and "not of works". She was endeavouring, like so many other religiously inclined people, to commend herself to the divine favour by her own efforts. She had yet to learn the lesson that the deeply religious Nicodemus was taught, when he came to Jesus by night, - "You must be born again" (John 3.3).

CHAPTER 2

CONVERSION AND AFTERWARDS

There is a certain similarity between Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, and Lydia "whose heart the Lord opened". Both women were clearly gifted and both were strongly religious, yet neither knew the experience of saving grace until the light quietly dawned upon them.

In the case of Selina, a strong link in the chain, which led to her conversion, was the spiritual transformation experienced by her sister-in-law, Lady Margaret Hastings. The Countess of Huntingdon, for all her good works, was to realise her sister-in-law possessed a peace and joy that hitherto had eluded her. At times she grew depressed, as she redoubled her efforts to "work out her own salvation". As time went on, she even felt tempted to give up the unequal struggle.

A serious illness, in which her very life was threatened, proved to be a spiritual landmark in Lady Huntingdon's life. She was brought low, in more ways than one. She was no longer in a position to carry out her good deeds. She felt lost and despaired of the future. She grew increasingly despondent. God was, in fact, speaking to her, convicting her of her sin and need, had she but realised it.

Meanwhile a religious revival was getting under way. Certain preachers, nicknamed "Methodists", were beginning to cause a considerable stir. Even members of the nobility, including Lady Margaret Hastings, were being affected by this "gospel preaching". She and her sister had heard the gospel faithfully preached in Yorkshire, by a Mr. Ingham, and they were deeply impressed. They came to recognise their own insufficiency, and publicly confessed their faith in Christ alone for salvation. Their zeal for the truth, they had so recently embraced, knew no bounds. Lady Margaret Hastings was quick to see that her first responsibility was to witness within her own family circle. She became deeply solicitous for the spiritual welfare of her family, including that of her sister-in-law. She urged her relatives to trust in Christ alone for salvation, and never ceased to bear witness to the new-found joy which she now experienced. Lady Huntingdon, for all her good works, knew little of either joy or peace in believing. It was largely through her serious illness, coupled with the radiant testimony of her sister-in-law, that Selina came into true faith. We do not know the precise date of her conversion, but it must have occurred shortly before July 26th 1739, when her sisters-in-law received a letter from her telling them of the good news. A. C. H. Seymour, in *The Life and Times of Selina Countess of Huntingdon*, describes the change of heart that took place:

Now the day began to dawn – Jesus, the Sun of Righteousness, arose, and burst in meridian splendour on her benighted soul. The scales fell from her eyes, and opened a passage for the light of life that sprang in, and death and darkness fled before it. Viewing herself as a brand plucked from the burning, she could not but stand astonished at the mighty power of that grace which saved her from eternal destruction just when she stood on its very brink, and raised her from the gates of hell to the confines of heaven; and the depths from which she was raised, made the heights which she reached only the more amazing; she felt the Rock beneath her, and from that secure position looked with astonishment downward, to that horrible pit from which she was so mercifully delivered - and upwards, in ecstasy, to that glory to which she

should be raised. The “sorrow of the world which worketh death” was now exchanged for that godly sorrow which worketh repentance unto life; and “joy unspeakable and full of glory” succeeded that bitterness that comes from the conviction of sin; she enjoyed already a delightful foretaste of heaven. Her disorder from that moment took a favourable turn; she was restored to perfect health, and, what was better, to newness of life. She determined thenceforth to present herself to God, as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable, which she was now convinced was her reasonable service.

The reality of the Countess’s conversion is beyond question. The change in her life was dramatic. She took every opportunity to confess openly her new-found faith in Christ, and did all she could to encourage those who preached the gospel of grace. Members of the nobility were taken aback by such a sudden change. It seemed as though she had taken leave of her senses and had become a religious fanatic. Lord Huntingdon did not entirely share her convictions, but his regard for her was such that he did nothing to interfere with her views, although some urged him to do so. He did, however, suggest she should consult with his former tutor at Oxford, Dr. Benson, who had now become Bishop of Gloucester. It seems that the learned Bishop had more than met his match. The Countess was ready to defend herself, and quoted freely both from Scripture and from the Articles of the Church of England. Dr. Benson was more than a little perturbed and bitterly lamented that he had ever ordained George Whitefield, to whom he largely attributed the Countess’s change of heart. "My Lord" said Lady Huntingdon, "Mark my words; when you are on your dying bed, that will be one of the few ordinations you will reflect upon with complacency." In the providence of God, the Countess proved to be right and the Bishop, before he died, begged Whitefield to remember him in his prayers. When, shortly after her conversion, John and Charles Wesley preached in the neighbourhood of Donnington Park, the Countess sent a warm message of greeting to them, assuring them of her determination to live to promote the glory of the Saviour who had died for her.

After her conversion, Selina's visits to the court tended to grow less frequent. When, however, there was tension between the King and the Prince of Wales, with the result that the Prince set up his own court at Kew, Lady Huntingdon attended it. Her visits, however, were very limited, a fact that evoked a good deal of criticism. One day the Prince of Wales asked one of the ladies of the court where the Countess might be. "I suppose praying with her beggars", came the contemptuous reply. The Prince retorted by saying: "Lady Charlotte, when I am dying, I think I shall be happy to seize the skirt of Lady Huntingdon's mantle, to lift me up with her to heaven."

In 1738, the first Methodist Society was formed in Fetter Lane, London, and Lord and Lady Huntingdon were frequently present at the meetings. Eminent preachers would unfold the truths of the gospel to the eager crowds who gathered. Whitefield and the Wesleys, Howell Harris, a celebrated Welsh preacher, and many others, would hold the crowds spellbound. Sometimes whole nights were spent in prayer, and extraordinary scenes took place as many experienced a joy in their lives they had never known before. The sense of the divine presence was overwhelming.

The Countess used her position to influence many of the nobility to hear the gospel. She was particularly anxious that they should hear Whitefield's sermons. Lady Ann Frankland, daughter of the Earl of Scarbrough, was one of the first among the aristocracy to be converted as a result of hearing Whitefield preach. Her husband reacted with the utmost cruelty, and she died an untimely death as the result of her trials. The Countess of Huntingdon kept up a lively correspondence with some of the most influential ladies at the Court, accompanying

them whenever she could to gospel meetings. Needless to say some of her friends reacted negatively, among them the Duchess of Buckingham, who was amazed that members of the nobility should be prepared to listen to such "humiliating truths". In a letter to the Countess, and with reference to the "Methodists", the Duchess wrote:

Their doctrines are most repulsive and strongly tinged with impertinence and disrespect towards their superiors, in perpetually endeavouring to level all ranks, and do away with all distinctions. It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting; and I cannot but wonder that your Ladyship should relish any sentiments so much at variance with high rank and good breeding.

The novelist, Margaret Lane, the present Countess of Huntingdon, comments:

Such indignation, provokes a smile to-day, but it was serious then. The wonderful sense of power which the aristocracy still enjoyed made Lady Huntingdon's missionary effort amongst her own class a formidable undertaking.

She goes on to point out that the Countess had, however, one factor on her side, which is so sadly lacking today - "nearly everyone believed, some as a matter of course, and some uneasily, in their immortal soul".

A. N. New, commenting on the influence of the Countess writes:

The good effected by the efforts of Lady Huntingdon was very great and, through her persuasions, members of the aristocracy were brought within sound of the preaching of the gospel. She embraced every opportunity of speaking on religious subjects to her friends in her mansions; and her manners were so polished, her talents so conspicuous, that her society was much sought after, notwithstanding her religion. Her drawing rooms in Town were crowded with doctors, poets, philosophers, statesmen, lords and ladies, where the great truths of religion were discussed and her Ladyship not infrequently astonished those present by the clearness and force of her views of truth.

One would not wish to give the impression that the Countess, in the full flush of her conversion experience, confined her attention to those of her own station in life. It has been said that, "while her drawing rooms were fitted with brilliant assemblies, her kitchen was crowded with the poor, to whom she dispensed her charities for the relief of their wants, and directed them to Jesus Christ as the only remedy for their guilt".

Rarely, it would seem, has the conversion of one woman, albeit a lady of noble birth, had such tremendous effects on the community at large. Eternity alone will reveal the full extent of the Countess's gracious influence. The full effect of her zeal, vision and liberality will never be fully known.

CHAPTER 3

THE COUNTESS AND HER FAMILY

Margaret Lane describes the ninth Earl as being no ascetic, yet conspicuous in that profligate age for his high standards of behaviour. Also, his sisters, the Ladies Margaret and Elizabeth Hastings, were renowned for their benevolent piety.

It is difficult to discover just what Selina's husband thought of his wife's activities. He certainly acted discreetly at all times, and welcomed to his stately home all and sundry. As noted already, he did consult with the Bishop of Gloucester about his wife's excessive zeal but, otherwise, he seems tacitly to have accepted the situation.

Lady Huntingdon found much happiness in her marriage and in family life. Although information is scanty, she was undoubtedly devoted to her husband and children. Her first child, Lord Francis, was born on March 13th 1729. His brother, George, arrived a year later—on March 29th 1730. Elizabeth, the Countess's eldest daughter, was born on March 23rd 1731 and her third son, Ferdinando, was born the following January. Selina, the second daughter, arrived in June 1735, but she died in infancy. The next child, born on December 3rd 1737, was also named Selina, after her mother, and the last child to be born to the Countess was Henry, who arrived in 1741, and died at the age of eighteen.

From a family point of view, Lady Huntingdon's life was a sad one. Her two sons, Ferdinando and George Hastings, died, in 1743, within eight months of each other of smallpox, aged eleven and thirteen respectively. Three years later, her husband died suddenly from a stroke. According to the records, his Lordship, who had hardly ever dreamed in his life before, had a most terrifying nightmare. He dreamed that death, in the semblance of a skeleton, appeared at the foot of the bed, in which he and his wife were sleeping, and then proceeded to creep up to the top of the bed under the bedclothes and lay between him and his wife. When the Earl told her of his dream the next morning she made light of it, but he himself was greatly affected by it, and died about a fortnight later. At the time of this triple bereavement, the Countess was only thirty-nine years old.

Francis, the oldest son, predeceased the Countess by only two years. He and the oldest daughter, Elizabeth, had not taken too kindly to the way their mother had opened up the home to so many clergymen and, it seems, they were somewhat embarrassed by it. Elizabeth, in fact, showed no interest in spiritual matters, and had little in common with her mother. The Countess's third daughter, also called Selina, shared her mother's faith, and was a great favourite with the Countess, often accompanying her on her travels. Young Lady Selina had made her appearance at Court and, in September 1761, she supported the train of Queen Charlotte at the Coronation. She was to have been married to her relative, Colonel George Hastings but, after a trying illness, she died, in 1763, at the age of twenty-six. The Countess wrote at the time:

It pleased our dear God and only Saviour to take from me my dearest, my altogether lovely child and daughter, Lady Selina Hastings, the desire of my eyes, and continual pleasure of my heart.

That Selina should have died with a personal faith in Christ was no small comfort to her mother, who greatly missed the love and companionship of her daughter.

Elizabeth was the only child to outlive the Countess. As a girl of eighteen, Lady Elizabeth acted as Lady of the Bedchamber to the two young princesses, sisters of George III. However, she did not hold the position for long and returned home. In 1752, she married Lord Rawdon, who later became Earl Moira, and she went to live in Ireland. Like her mother, Lady Moira was a talented lady and a great patroness of literature.

Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, could almost be regarded as a female counterpart of Job. She was stripped of husband and family, but her faith triumphed. In 1749 she had vacated Donnington Hall in favour of her son, who was then approaching his majority. With her other children and her sisters-in-law, the Ladies Hastings, she rented a house at Ashby-de-la-Zouch. In a letter to a ministerial friend, written shortly after her move, Lady Huntingdon said:

The affairs of my family called me from home; but I am again brought back in safety and much happiness of heart, and that to a sweet little family who live but to devote every hour more and more to the love and knowledge of the Lord Jesus. We had agreed upon this retreat, and taken a larger house among us for this purpose, and we all wish your prayers. To become the Lord's in body, soul and spirit is the one cry and desire of our hearts; and we know he will not reject us, nor cast us out . . . All gospel ministers it is our highest honour and happiness to serve, and no denomination do we ever reject.

Lady Huntingdon believed in using her house as a basis for evangelism but not always without disconcerting consequences. On one occasion, in Ashby, when George Whitefield was preaching in the Countess's home, riots broke out and some of the congregation were threatened on their way home. There were encouragements, however, particularly among the poorer people. The Countess had a genuine love for the poor. Philip Doddridge, the hymn writer, and a close friend of hers, wrote: "Lady Huntingdon is quite a mother to the poor; she visits them and prays with them in their sicknesses; and they leave their children to her for a legacy when they die, and she takes care of them."

Probably one of the most stubborn unbelievers with whom the Countess had dealings was her own first cousin and her father's heir, Lord Ferrers. He had been tried for murder, and was imprisoned in the Tower of London awaiting execution. The Countess visited him daily, but only met with contemptuous rebuffs as she wrestled for his soul. Acting as she believed in his best interests, the Countess saw to it that his wine ration was reduced and his playing cards confiscated. She also persuaded the Governor not to allow him to say goodbye to his mistress, by whom he had had four children.

When her sister-in-law, Lady Anne Hastings died, in 1775, Lady Huntingdon lost one who had shared deeply with her in works of benevolence. The two had so often visited the poor together and sought to point them to Christ. In her illnesses, the Countess had always been greatly comforted through the attentions of her sister-in-law.

The sister of Lady Anne, Lady Margaret Hastings, who had been the first of the Earl of Huntingdon's family to respond to the gospel, subsequently married the Methodist preacher, the Rev. Benjamin Ingham. She died in 1768, at the age of 67. She had been a true help-meet to her husband, who never fully recovered from the shock of his wife's death. Mr. Ingham survived Lady Margaret by only four years. Ingham had been a remarkable man in many ways. A student at Oxford, he had linked up with the Wesleys as early as 1732. He was ordained by the Bishop of Oxford and set sail with John and Charles Wesley and their friends for Georgia on October 14th 1735, where the party arrived safely the following February. In 1732, the colony of Georgia had been founded, in honour of King George II, by a private

company. Mr. Ingham preached to the native Indians of the colony and even composed an Indian grammar before returning to England towards the end of 1736.

It was in the course of a preaching tour in Yorkshire that Mr. Ingham came into contact with the Huntingdon family. The Earl's sisters had heard him preach and were greatly impressed, so much so that Lady Betty Hastings invited him to her home, Ledstone Hall, where he became a great favourite.

The latter days of Mr. Ingham's life were clouded by sorrow, not only because of his wife's death, but because he had to witness the break-up of many of the Societies he had founded. In spite of disappointments, however, it could be truly said that Yorkshire, as a county, owed an incalculable debt to Ingham, through whose gracious ministry had come about a genuine spiritual awakening.

The Countess had faced many domestic sorrows in her long life. At the age of 39, she had been left a widow with a family to care for. Her trials and tribulations were many and varied. One of her biographers wrote:

There was the disapprobation of kindred, added to the sneers and contempt of a giddy circle. It needed realising faith, and strength from above, for a sensitive woman calmly and meekly to bear all this, and these were not wanting.

When her husband died, the Countess devoted her energies even more unstintingly to the service of God. To her dying day she cherished the memory of the Earl, and placed a bust of herself on his tomb, but she refused to give way to self-pity, believing that in her widowhood she should continue even more intently the course she had already been following.

A. H. New wrote:

She renounced the ease and splendour of noble rank for the service of her Saviour. She mingled with the world only that she might be useful in saving souls: and exerted all the influence she possessed to secure greater triumphs to the gospel.

CHAPTER 4

THE COUNTESS AND HER CIRCLE

The Countess grew up in a stratum of society far removed from that with which the so-called "man in the street" is familiar. It was only natural that, after her conversion, she should seek to influence for Christ those who belonged to a station in life comparable with her own. She took to her heart the words of Christ to the demoniac — "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you."

Before her conversion, Lady Huntingdon had been prominent in Court circles and numbered among her acquaintances most of the well-known figures of the day. Needless to say, many members of the aristocracy were mystified by Lady Huntingdon's new-found faith. The sense of power that the aristocracy still enjoyed made her evangelistic efforts among her own class all the more difficult. The Duchess of Buckingham, as we have seen, was decidedly not impressed by the emphasis on sin and the need for repentance, that the Methodist preachers constantly reiterated.

In the face of much ridicule, Lady Huntingdon persevered and succeeded in persuading many distinguished people to hear her chaplain, George Whitefield, preach, among them Lady Townshend, noted for her eccentricities and her wit, the Duchess of Queensbury and Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough. One of the first of the nobility to be converted through Whitefield's preaching was Lady Ann Frankland, daughter of the Earl of Scarbrough.

Whitefield at one time would preach twice a week in the drawing-room of the Countess's town house. In one of his letters, he wrote: "Good Lady Huntingdon is come to town, and I am to preach at her Ladyship's house twice a week to the great and noble. O that some of them may be effectually called, and taste of the riches of redeeming love!" Lord Bolingbroke, who had little sympathy with the Christian message, was nevertheless much impressed by Whitefield's preaching, describing him as "the most extraordinary man of our times". There were, of course, others who preached at meetings arranged by the Countess, Wesley, Venn, Romaine, Fletcher and Toplady, to mention but a few — but Whitefield was undoubtedly the most gifted and forceful of them all. Lord Chesterfield, a professed atheist, but a lover of good oratory was, on one occasion, so entranced by Whitefield's portrayal of a blind beggar tottering on the brink of a precipice, that he bounded from his seat, exclaiming, "Good God, he's gone!"

Lady Huntingdon became well acquainted with some of the Scottish nobility, who had been converted through Whitefield's preaching and, when they came to London, they invariably visited her. The Countess was instrumental in starting a meeting for prayer and Bible study for ladies of noble birth. The names of those attending these gatherings represent some of the outstanding socialites of the time. Inspired by the example of the Countess, many other titled ladies would open their drawing-rooms for evangelistic gatherings. One of those converted through the efforts of the Countess was Lady Glenorchy, who was destined to become the "Selina of Scotland".

It was surely right that Lady Huntingdon should capitalize upon the position in society that she held in order to win her "peers" for Christ. She used to say she was thankful for the "m" in the phrase, "Not many noble are called." It must not be thought, however, that the

Countess confined her attention to the nobility – far from it. She paid particular attention to the spiritual welfare of her own servants, faithfully preaching to them the gospel of God's redeeming grace. The Countess would never hesitate to visit a poor woman in her home, and would never fail to present to her the gospel. The story is recorded of a visit she paid to a soldier's wife, who lay dying after the birth of twins. She forcefully described:

her awful state, by nature and by practice, and the imminent danger of her soul, if she died unpardoned, unrenewed and unwashed in the Saviour's blood, that the poor soldier's wife burst into a flood of tears under a sense of her guilt and misery, and began to call upon the Name of the Lord, with all the earnestness of which her dying frame was capable.

As one recalls not only the evangelistic zeal, but also the philanthropic activities of the Countess, one is reminded of the great social changes that have taken place in succeeding generations. No longer are children taught to sing:

The rich man in his castle
The poor man at his gate
God made them high or lowly
And ordered their estate.

In any case, the extremes of wealth and poverty no longer exist to anything like the same extent. The advent of the welfare state has lifted, to some degree, the responsibility for caring for the poor and needy from the shoulders of individual philanthropists. In the western world there has been a general levelling up, so that class distinction is by no means as clear-cut as once was the case. Yet it would not be true to say that there are no longer any distinguishable groupings in our society. We still speak of the "down and outs", those who have virtually opted out of society and find themselves isolated from the main stream. There are also the "up and outs" — that circle of men and women who, by virtue of their birth and heredity, still occupy a favoured place in society, but who are rarely reached by stereotyped methods of evangelism. Such folk still need to be cared for, and there is a place for those who, like the Countess, return to their own kinsfolk, there to bear witness to their new-found faith. Mercifully, there are still some evangelists, modern counterparts of George Whitefield, who appear to be able to get a hearing among such folk: Dr. Billy Graham being notable among them. Thank God there are still occasions when the gospel is clearly and unashamedly proclaimed to members of the aristocracy, much in the same way as their forebears were reached through the tireless labours of the renowned Countess.

In speaking of "her circle", we must not forget that this consisted primarily of the "Methodists", whose earnest preaching attracted so much abuse. These men were denounced by the Church of England authorities, and their meetings were frequently broken up. Often magistrates would refuse to intervene and so the Countess would take action on their behalf.

Lady Huntingdon appealed to the Secretary of State, Lord Carteret who, in turn, brought the matter before the King. King George:

caused Lord Carteret to forward her Ladyship a letter, dated November 19th 1745, in which he says that the King, as father and protector of his people, will permit no persecution to take place on account of religion; and that all magistrates shall be requested to afford protection to those who require it in the discharge of their religious observances.

To quote again, A. H. New:

She heeded not the sarcasms or witticisms of the gay, nor the stern opposition of the world. The anathema of worldly-minded priests fell powerless upon her; the fear of many was unknown in her courageous breast; and she could dare the spirit of persecution to do its utmost to those who were animated with like precious faith. She cast the shield of protection around her own ministers; the cry of the oppressed, when re-echoed from her own heart, obtained relief from the highest authorities; and when she journeyed through the country her very name was sufficient to strike terror into the enemies of the cross, and to attract thousands to see the illustrious lady.

When one reads biographies of the Countess, one cannot fail to be struck by the atmosphere of apparent stuffiness with which she seems to have been surrounded. Much of this is no doubt accounted for by the manners of the time. What today would be regarded as unabashed snobbishness was not seen in that light in those days. We should not, for example, be very happy to write of the sisters-in-law of the Countess that they "were amiably condescending to all their inferiors, even the poorest". It could be that some of the leaders in the evangelical awakening were overawed by the high society into which they were introduced by their patroness and were possibly guilty at times of a degree of flunkeyism. Whitefield tells us of an occasion when the Countess was ill and thousands of admirers joined in singing these verses:

Gladly we join to pray for those
Who, rich with worldly honours, shine,
Who dare to own a Saviour's cause,
And in that hated cause to join;
Yes, we would praise Thee that a few
Love Thee, though rich and noble too.

Uphold this star in Thy right hand-
Crown her endeavours with success;
Among the great ones may she stand,
A witness of Thy righteousness,
Till many nobles join Thy train
And triumph in the Lamb that's slain.

In being slightly amused by such phraseology, we need to remind ourselves once more that times have changed!

CHAPTER 5

THE COUNTESS AND HER CHAPELS

It is, of course, a well-known fact, that the Countess of Huntingdon was a member of the Established Church, and it was never part of her original intention to secede from it. However, many of the "Methodists", whom the Countess befriended, had themselves been expelled from their churches because of their evangelistic zeal, and were driven to preach the gospel in the open air and in the streets. The Countess felt that, in such circumstances, she should embark on a scheme for establishing chapels in different localities, which would serve as preaching stations for such men, and where new converts might be built up in the faith.

The first such chapel to be built was in North Street, Brighton, next to the Countess's own house. The chapel was opened in 1761 and, for some time, was served exclusively by ordained clergymen in the Church of England. Amongst those whose ministries were deeply appreciated by the local congregation were Romaine, Berridge, Venn and Fletcher. In 1767, the Countess superintended the enlargement of her chapel in Brighton. In the intervening years the work had been so richly blessed that the accommodation was no longer adequate. The day before the re-opening of the enlarged premises was spent as a day of prayer — the Countess herself spent several hours alone with God, earnestly pleading for His blessing upon the chapel. On the evening of the official opening, Whitefield preached from the text: "Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." The place was crowded and the congregation listened with rapt attention.

In 1774, the chapel was rebuilt and, at the re-opening, the sermon was preached by the veteran William Romaine, who was by now the Countess's oldest chaplain and her most trusted adviser. Right up to the time of her death the Countess took a most active interest in the work at Brighton, and rejoiced over the great blessing that attended it. Over the years various additions were made to the premises until, eventually, the building was enlarged to seat 1,500 persons. This chapel stood in a commanding position in the centre of Brighton until 1969, when the premises were sold and demolition commenced.

Many farmers and farm workers from the rural areas of Sussex were attracted to Brighton, to hear the various distinguished preachers that occupied the Countess's pulpit. Some of these country folk implored her to make it possible for them to hear the same glorious truths nearer their own homes. At that time, the Countess acquired the lease of a country mansion, Ote Hall, near Wivelsfield in Sussex. She fitted up the large hall as a chapel, using the upper rooms for her own residence and also to provide accommodation for visiting preachers. The ministry of the Rev. William Romaine was signally blessed at Ote Hall. Amongst his converts was an army officer, Captain Scott, who later himself became a noted preacher. Another convert was an old man named Abraham, who was a hundred years old. He came to see the light through the preaching of the Rev. Henry Venn. Old Abraham died rejoicing in his new-found faith at the age of 105. Today, there stands in the village of Wivelsfield, an independent chapel, known as Ote Hall, where the same gospel is still faithfully preached week by week.

Another chapel erected by the Countess was located in the fashionable inland resort of Tunbridge Wells, a town that, at that time, had quite a reputation for various forms of vice and for its spiritual destitution, in contrast to its material prosperity. The Countess was cheered to

find that the people of the town were ready to listen to the gospel when it was preached in the open-air. In 1768, she purchased a residence for herself in Tunbridge Wells and, the following year, a chapel was erected nearby. The opening took place on July 23rd, when the building was thronged with people. George Whitefield preached from the text: "How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." The crowd was far too large to be accommodated inside, so Whitefield preached again in the open-air from a mound nearby. Sad to say, due to dwindling congregations and also the advent of many other evangelical "causes" in the district, the Countess's church at Tunbridge Wells has been closed.

Yet another chapel for which the Countess was directly responsible was erected in Sussex, at Lewes. There had been considerable opposition from local clergy to the preaching of the gospel, but Lady Huntingdon felt the Lord was calling her to erect a chapel. The building was opened in August 1765, and was regularly supplied by the Countess's chaplains, and also students from her College at Trevecca.

These four chapels established by the Countess were reasonably near one another, but Lady Huntingdon now looked to an entirely new area. She resolved to erect a house for herself and a chapel in Bath. She secured an appropriate piece of ground in the Vineyards, and a place of worship was opened in October 1765. In a letter to a friend, Whitefield describes the opening:

Could you have been present at the opening of the chapel, you would have been much pleased. The building is extremely plain, and yet equally grand. A most beautiful original! All was conducted with great solemnity. Though a wet day, the place was very full, and assuredly the Great Shepherd and Bishop of souls consecrated and made it holy ground by His presence.

The same year that the Countess opened her chapel at Bath, she accepted an offer from Lord Chesterfield for his house and chapel at Bretby Hall, Derbyshire. In the course of a tour of Wales, the Countess visited Swansea where, in response to the pleas of a small group of keen evangelical Christians, she erected a chapel that proved to be a great blessing to the neighbourhood. In September 1771, Lady Huntingdon received a letter drawing her attention to the state of affairs in Margate, Kent, and requesting that some of her chaplains might visit the town. Two students from Trevecca duly arrived in Margate, and preached in the open-air. Before long, a keen interest in the gospel message had spread throughout Thanet, and an old meeting place in Dover, which had been closed for some years, was opened up for the preaching of the gospel.

Subsequent years saw either the erection or the acquisition of chapels in areas as far apart as Birmingham, Bootle, Hereford, Hull, Reading, Westminster and Worcester. Demands for meeting places came from all parts of the country, and the Countess took a deep personal interest in every request made.

Probably it was her acquisition of Spa Fields Chapel, in Clerkenwell, London, which aroused the greatest controversy, and had the most far-reaching consequences. In 1774, a large building, which had formerly been used as a place of amusement, came on the market. It had a spacious circular auditorium and the Countess seriously considered its purchase as a preaching centre, but abandoned the idea on the grounds of expense. However, a group of Christian businessmen stepped in and acquired it. They called the building Northampton Chapel and appointed two men, Herbert Jones and William Taylor, as ministers. Large congregations were drawn to the place, and the attention of William Sellon, the Vicar of the

Parish, was aroused. He strongly objected to what he regarded as unwarranted intrusion into his Parish. A lawsuit followed and, as a result, the chapel had to be closed. Quite undaunted, the Countess thereupon acquired the premises, which were re-opened in March 1779, as Spa Fields Chapel, and she appointed Thomas Haweis and Cradock Glascott as her chaplains. She argued that she had a right, as a peeress of the realm, to employ her own chaplains on her own premises. Sellon, however, once more opposed the opening of the chapel and another Court action ensued, which the Countess lost. This meant, in effect, that all the Countess's chapels were in jeopardy. As the historians, Overton and Relton, have pointed out:

If her chapels were still to be regarded as belonging to the Church, then the laws of the Church must be obeyed. If not, and they were to be sheltered under the Toleration Act, they must be regarded as Dissenting places of worship.

In January 1782, the Countess decided to secede and her chapels then ceased to be societies within the Church of England and became a sect. This fact was further established when the first ordinations were held in 1783. Thus Lady Huntingdon, against her wishes, was forced into being a Dissenter. She felt the situation keenly but found, even so, occasion to rejoice. She said:

I am to be cast out of the church now, only for what I have been doing these forty years speaking and living for Jesus Christ! And if the days of my captivity are now to be accomplished, those that turn me out, and so set me at liberty may soon feel what it is, by sore distress themselves, for those hard services they have caused me. Blessed be the Lord, I have not one care relative to this event, but to be found exactly faithful to God and man through all. You will smile and rejoice with me in all I may suffer for our dear Emmanuel's sake! I have asked none to go with me — and none that do not come willingly to the help of the Lord, and by faith in the Son of God lay all at His feet — any other would do me no good, and He only knows these.

The result of all this was that, for the most part, the Countess's chaplains withdrew from her service. As the Bishop of London observed, it was impossible for a clergyman "to divide himself between sectarianism and the Establishment, between the Church of England and the Church of Lady Huntingdon". The congregations that had been gathered through the instrumentality of the Countess were, henceforth, somewhat quaintly described as "Societies in the secession patronized by Lady Huntingdon". Thus was born what has subsequently become known as "the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion".

CHAPTER 6

THE COUNTESS AND THE POWERS THAT BE

One of the outstanding characteristics of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, was her fearlessness. No doubt her own social standing provided her with a measure of self-confidence but, even so, her boldness before both King and prelate became a byword.

Lady Huntingdon was scandalized by the extravagance displayed by Dr. Cornwallis, Archbishop of Canterbury. He had arranged several magnificent balls at Lambeth Palace and had thereby aroused not a little gossip. The Archbishop's wife took the lead in the world of fashion and, throughout the winter, the Palace would be thronged with gay and frivolous guests. The Countess, still a member of the Church of England, felt she must remonstrate with the Archbishop concerning his activities.

Accompanied by the Marquis of Townshend, a distant relative of the Archbishop, Lady Huntingdon called upon Dr. Cornwallis in order to point out politely, but firmly, the harm that was being done to the cause of true religion through his unbecoming activities. The Archbishop listened patiently, restraining his anger, but Mrs. Cornwallis took the opportunity of denigrating the Countess on every possible occasion in the circles in which she moved.

The Countess later made another attempt, privately, to warn the Archbishop, but she was met with coldness and indifference and Dr. Cornwallis fiercely denounced her and her friends as hypocrites and fanatics.

Undaunted, the Countess felt she had no alternative but to seek a private audience with the King himself. Accompanied by Lord Dartmouth, and the Duchess of Ancaster, Lady Huntingdon was received by both the King and Queen in the Palace at Kew. She received a warm welcome and proceeded to explain the purpose of her errand. In hearing how the Countess had been treated by the Archbishop, the King said:

Madam, the feelings you have discovered, and the conduct you have adopted on this occasion are highly creditable to you. The Archbishop's behaviour has been slightly hinted to me already; but now that I have a certainty of his proceedings, and most ungracious conduct towards your Ladyship, after your trouble in remonstrating with him, I shall interpose my authority, and see what that will do towards reforming such indecent practices.

Lady Huntingdon spent over an hour with the King and Queen. The King clearly revealed he was well aware of the Countess's activities, and he complimented her on her benevolence and her concern for the revival of true religion. He remarked:

I have been told so many odd stories of your Ladyship, that I am free to confess that I felt a great degree of curiosity to see if you were at all like other women; and I am happy in having an opportunity of assuring your Ladyship of the very good opinion I have of you, and how very highly I estimate your character, your zeal and abilities, which cannot be consecrated to a more noble purpose.

The story is told of a bishop who complained to the King about some of the Countess's ministers, who had created something of a sensation in his diocese. His Majesty offered a

solution — "Make bishops of them — make bishops of them." The prelate replied: "That *might* be done, but please your Majesty, we cannot make a bishop of Lady Huntingdon." At that point the Queen interposed: "It would be a lucky circumstance if you could, for she puts you all to shame."

It is clear that Lady Huntingdon created a most favourable impression upon both King and Queen. The Archbishop duly received a letter of admonition, and was taken to task for his "improprieties". The King at the same time confided to Lord Dartmouth that he had been very agreeably surprised by his visitor. The Countess was not freakish at all, as he had imagined, but very clever and well-informed, with "all the ease and politeness belonging to a woman of rank. With all the enthusiasm ascribed to her, she is an honour to her sex and the nation". The advice given by the King to a noble lady, who was highly critical of the Countess but who had never met her, is worth repeating: "Never form your opinion of anyone from the ill-natured remarks and censures of others. Judge for yourself, and you have my leave to tell everybody how highly I think of Lady Huntingdon."

The Countess was not greatly involved in politics as such, but she was alert to issues that appeared to relate directly to the Faith. An association had been formed of clergy and laymen in the Established Church, with a view to petitioning Parliament to allow a declaration of assent to the Sufficiency of Holy Scripture, to be substituted for subscription to the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion. The Countess and her friends detected in this a subtle attempt to circumvent the great doctrines for which the Reformers had stood. She therefore set about raising opposition to the measure, and enlisted the active support of a number of her influential friends. Lord North assured the Countess that he would oppose the petition, as did Edmund Burke, the distinguished man of letters. The petition was presented to Parliament on February 6th 1772. A very lively debate ensued but, ultimately, the House rejected the petition by an overwhelming majority - a result that was extremely gratifying to the Countess.

Another religious issue arose at this time in which the Countess expressed her interest. In the course of the debate to which reference has already been made, several speakers drew attention to the hardship suffered by many dissenting ministers. A meeting of ministers was called in London to consider how their burdens might be eased. Over the years the Countess had become intimately acquainted with many of these men and had a great sympathy for them. She therefore favoured the idea of petitioning Parliament to act in their interests, although she expressed her regret that some, who were the strongest advocates of the petition, differed greatly from her in their theological views. Many churchmen viewed the situation with alarm, and believed that the proposed Bill was a threat to the future of the Established Church. However, a Bill, that would have removed many of the disabilities then suffered by Dissenters, was passed by the House of Commons, only to be rejected on its second reading in the Lords.

It might be appropriate to record here a memorable speech by Lord Chatham, in reply to an attack on dissenting ministers by the Archbishop of York, Dr. Drummond, who had described them as men of ambition. Chatham said:

The dissenting ministers are represented as men of close ambition; they are so, my Lords; and their ambition is to keep close to the college of fishermen, not of cardinals; and to the doctrine of inspired apostles, not to the decrees of interested and aspiring bishops. They contend for a scriptural creed, and spiritual worship; we have a Calvinistic creed, a Popish liturgy and an Arminian clergy. The Reformation has laid open the Scriptures to all; let not the bishops shut them again. Laws in support of

ecclesiastical powers are pleaded, which it would shock humanity to execute. It is said that religious sects have done great mischief when they were not kept under restraint; but history affords no proof that sects have ever been mischievous, when they were not opposed and persecuted by the ruling Church.

The Countess of Huntingdon, in spite of her own strong allegiance to the Established Church, was not ashamed to espouse the cause of her dissenting friends. Again we see her courage and her catholicity, qualities that she so often displayed in the course of her eventful life.

It will no doubt be of interest to record another interview that the Countess had — this time with the celebrated actor, Garrick. At the time, a play was being performed on the London stage called *The Minor*, in which Whitefield was held up as an object of ridicule, as were the Methodists in general. The Countess appealed to the Lord Chamberlain, the Duke of Devonshire, and later met Garrick himself in the theatre in Drury Lane. He promised to use his influence in excluding the play, adding that had he realised the offence it would give he would never have allowed it to be acted.

The London stage at the present time represents a degree of permissiveness even greater than that of the eighteenth century and, although we do not have a twentieth century Lady Huntingdon, there are still those who, like her, are prepared to take up the cudgels in the interests of common decency.

CHAPTER 7

THE COUNTESS AND HER COLLEGE

The Countess was forever seeking more effective means of reaching the people with the gospel. Her enthusiasm knew no bounds. She personally received almost daily invitations from all parts of the country to visit towns, large and small, in the interests of evangelism. The fields were certainly white but the reapers all too few. More preachers were needed but they must be adequately trained for the task.

The interest of the Countess in training men for the ministry stemmed from her support of a College in America that had recently been founded for this purpose. In 1753 a deputation arrived from across the Atlantic to solicit funds for a College in New Jersey, which had been founded to train men for the Presbyterian ministry. Incidentally, this represents the origin of what is now the University of Princeton.

George Whitefield enthusiastically supported the American project and the Countess gave generously to its needs. She also supported another American College, Dartmouth in New Hampshire, which was later given a charter by King George III, under the name of Dartmouth College.

In England, Oxford and Cambridge were still the only places where men could train for the Anglican ministry, and these universities were closed to dissenters. In 1768, six students of St. Edmund Hall, Oxford, were expelled for "their leanings toward Methodism". One of the tutors complained to the College principal that they were, "Enthusiasts who talked of inspiration, regeneration and drawing nigh to God." The Countess was greatly troubled that such men should be expelled from the University. She made her views on the subject clearly known and the event confirmed her conviction that she should assist in the training of evangelical ministers.

For some five years before this Lady Huntingdon, influenced by Howell Harris, had been giving prayerful thought to the need of providing an academy for preachers. During the year 1767 the plan took shape and her ideas crystallized. The Countess recalled a delightful spot in Breconshire that she had visited. She made enquiries regarding Trevecca Isaf, now known as College farm, a building dating back to 1576, which might easily be converted into a small theological college. It was chosen because it was only about 500 yards from Trevecca Fawr, near Talgarth, the home of the great Welsh preacher, Howell Harris, who played such an important part in the Revival. He had lived there since retiring from itinerant evangelism in 1750 and had established a religious community around his home, which was a centre of evangelical interest and activity. Selina thought, therefore, he would help in giving guidance and exhortation in the training of her students. Considerable alterations were necessary at Trevecca Isaf, and some additions were made to the existing structure, including the building of a chapel. In May 1768, an agent of the Countess, H. Leighton of Bath, was able to report that men were putting floors in the new rooms and also doing the necessary plastering. He ordered that the provision of cupboards should be included in the work, but queried with the Countess whether she required wallpaper in the chapel!

Howell Harris then took an active personal interest in the development of Trevecca Isaf. He recruited servants for the College, warned against the local beer and advised the College to

brew its own! The Countess had every intention of paying frequent visits to the College and so she supplied furniture and books for her personal use when staying there: she also commissioned the making of a silver Communion set for use in the College Chapel.

On August 24th 1768 — Lady Huntingdon's birthday — Whitefield preached at the official opening of the College. He chose as his text, Exodus 20. 24: "In all places where I record my name, I will come unto thee and bless thee." Little did Whitefield realise how applicable that verse was going to be since, during its history, the College was destined to have several moves. The year after the Countess's death, the College moved to Cheshunt in Hertfordshire, while in 1905 a further move was made to Cambridge. In 1967 the College, now known as Cheshunt College, linked up with Westminster College, the College in Cambridge serving the Presbyterian Church of England.

On the Sunday following the official opening, Whitefield addressed a congregation of some thousands who had gathered in the courtyard in front of the College. On this occasion he took as his text, 1 Corinthians 3: 11: "Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." The general superintendence of the College was entrusted to the Rev. John W. Fletcher, Vicar of Madeley in Shropshire. He was known as president, a title corresponding with American Puritan usage. Fletcher was a Swiss by birth, his name being an anglicized version of Fléchère. It is recorded of him that, before coming to Madeley, he had refused another living on the grounds that it would mean for him "too much money and too little work". Fletcher was an able and scholarly man, and his austerity and piety a by-word among evangelicals. He did not reside at the College, but visited it for prolonged periods from time to time and gave outstanding spiritual impetus to it. He would often conclude his lectures by saying to the students: "As many of you as are athirst for the fullness of the Spirit, follow me to my room." Those who accepted the invitation would frequently spend from two to three hours in fervent prayer. The day-to-day direction of the College was left in the hands of a resident tutor, or "headmaster". The first to occupy this office was Joseph Easterbrook, who was succeeded by Joseph Benson. Benson paid this glowing tribute to the president of the College: "Prayer, praise, love and zeal, all ardent, elevated above what one would think attainable in this state of frailty, were the elements in which he continually lived."

One of the Countess's chaplains, John Berridge, had made it clear he did not favour the establishment of the College at Trevecca Isaf but, as he saw the work develop, he soon altered his opinion, and became an enthusiastic supporter. At the first anniversary of the College, John Wesley was one of the special speakers and, a year later, Henry Venn, Howell Harris and John Berridge all took part in the celebrations. The anniversaries were spread over two or more days and proved to be great rallying points for evangelicals. Travel was not always easy, and there is a record of the Countess and her party taking two days to reach Trevecca from Bath. Prayers and sermons in Welsh appear to have been a feature of special meetings and celebrations at the College. At least one visiting Englishman learned a phrase or two in Welsh, to the obvious delight of the local people.

The curriculum at Trevecca was somewhat different from that of the average theological college today. Formal subjects including Greek and Latin, and Ecclesiastical History, Natural Philosophy and Geography were taken, but the main emphasis was firmly placed on the spiritual side. The students spent the greater part of their time itinerating, and were sometimes away for weeks at a stretch. Some would undertake brief pastorates at one of the Countess's chapels. All students were personally vetted by the Countess herself. It was not her policy to keep men tied to their books for too long a time, since she shared the view commonly held by evangelicals at that time, that the day of Grace was fast drawing to a close.

Knox, in his book "Enthusiasm", comments shrewdly, "Wesley found in Lady Huntingdon's attitude, traces of an autocratic manner which he altogether failed to detect in himself."

Fletcher resigned from the office of president of the College in 1771, on account of the Arminian-Calvinist dispute that was then at its height. Wesley had castigated his friend for associating with, "those who deny the doctrine of general redemption". The Countess took strong exception to this rebuke since she, with considerable justification, stoutly maintained she had, "sought to maintain peace and unity in the household of God".

As far as can be ascertained, the Countess never replaced John Fletcher but, thereafter, personally superintended the affairs of the College. The anniversaries of the opening of the College continued to draw enormous crowds to Trevecca. In 1776, Augustus Toplady was one of the chief speakers and, in a letter to a friend, he describes the scene:

The congregation was so large that the chapel would not have contained a fourth part of the people who were supposed to amount to three thousand. No fewer than one thousand three hundred horses were turned into one large field adjoining the College.

On this occasion the platform, on which Toplady and other ministers were seated, collapsed and he was thrown to the ground. Undaunted, he picked himself up and continued with the service. When Howell Harris died in 1773, funeral services were held at Trevecca and, according to the Countess, it was an occasion of great mourning, 20,000 people being present and no less than nine sermons were preached.

Lady Huntingdon exercised a strong influence over her students. She was concerned above all that they should become effective preachers. Horses were kept to convey students to their appointments. Occasionally a student would refuse to return to his studies, preferring to remain with the people to whom he had been sent to preach. One such young man, John Honeywill, decided to stay with the people at Melksham, in Wiltshire, instead of finishing his course at Trevecca. This infuriated the Countess who, "ordered him to send back forthwith, the pony on which he used to ride and the gown in which he used to preach".

During the years 1768-1791, the average annual intake of students would be fewer than a dozen. Although the course was intended to last three years, few remained that long. Accommodation was limited and there was often a waiting list. As early as 1776 the Countess could write, "The Lord is powerfully at work by the College in most of the counties of England and Wales."

A. H. New writes:

Her College was essential to the accomplishment of her plans; and she breathed into her students the zealous spirit which glowed within her. She treated them with maternal kindness, and so thoroughly won their gratitude that they were ready to do anything to please their noble patroness, and to promote her great designs.

The Countess maintained a keen personal interest in the welfare of each of her students, praying with them and for them. She would regularly correspond with them after they left the College. It is of note that although Trevecca-trained preachers excited a powerful influence in many parts of England, the case in Wales was far different. Methodism with its "exhorters" was firmly established in Wales and Trevecca suffered from being neither a Methodist College nor a Welsh College.

Throughout her lifetime Lady Huntingdon gave liberally of her time and energies to maintain the work of the College. There were others also who supported the work generously, including the Countess's Scottish friend and counterpart, Lady Glenorchy. Lady Chesterfield, daughter of George I, was another who contributed to the College. During the time when the College was at Trevecca, more than 150 students passed through it and went out into the Christian ministry. As the Countess grew older, she became concerned about the future of her College. On October 5th 1787, she gave a dinner at the Castle and Falcon in Aldersgate Street to those interested in perpetuating the College. A tentative plan had already been made for the setting up of a society with this very purpose in view. This society, the Apostolic Society, was eventually formed, and it was agreed that Trustees appointed by Lady Huntingdon should constitute the committee of the Society. Thus the future management of the Society and the College was in the hands of a group of Trustees, who were pledged to report regularly to subscribers but not be subject to them. The way ahead was not easy and there were those who complained of the autocratic nature of the scheme. The meetings of the Apostolic Society were infrequent and, for a time, little more was done beyond raising finance. At a meeting on July 6th 1791, after the Countess's death, it was resolved that the College (the lease of the house at Trevecca having expired) should be removed to the neighbourhood of London. An estate of over nine acres, upon which was a large house, was purchased at Cheshunt, Hertfordshire, for the sum of £950. The Countess had bequeathed the furniture, library and Communion plate and all her other property at Trevecca to the Society.

Geoffrey Thomas, writing in *The Banner of Truth* magazine, at the time of the bi-centenary of Cheshunt College, makes these comments:

Trevecca was certainly more successful in providing fellowship in the gospel and opportunity for the work of evangelism than in being an educational institution . . . the influence of its founder, the Countess of Huntingdon, is an essential factor in any appreciation of its achievements. Her vision was its vision, her limitations were its limitations.

It is sad to have to record that the College, founded on the prayers and gifts of evangelical Christians, should eventually have been sold to the Freemasons, in 1967, when it joined forces with Westminster College, Cambridge. Its original purpose was:

The education and instruction of truly pious young men, whom the Lord shall be pleased to call, and who may be desirous of devoting themselves to the Ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ, at home or abroad.

It was not intended that the College should serve a particular denomination. It was, in fact, specifically stated that:

Students may be ordained in the Established Church or other Churches of Christ and serve either in the late Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion, or otherwise, as they shall afterwards think proper.

Much to the Countess's disappointment, however, few of her students managed to obtain Episcopal ordination, since the bishops didn't regard the aims and standard of education of Trevecca with favour. Originally governors, presidents, tutors as well as students were required to affirm their acceptance of the Fifteen Articles of Faith of the Countess's Connexion. By a Scheme approved in 1908, however, this requirement was modified, so that all that was required was a declaration that those concerned were willing to carry on the work of the College, "in general agreement" with the Fifteen Articles.

When Cheshunt College amalgamated with Westminster College a fund was set up known as the Cheshunt Foundation. This is administered by the governors of Westminster College, including those nominated by the Connexion. Grants are allocated each year to enable students to pursue theological training either here or overseas. Over the years students have been assisted in this way to study at All Nations Christian College, Elim Bible College, London Bible College and Sierra Leone Bible College amongst others.

CHAPTER 8

CONTROVERSY

It is, of course, a fact of history that, in the eighteenth century, God raised up two men in particular, John Wesley and George Whitefield, and used them as His instruments for awakening England from spiritual slumber. Yet these two men were strangely different both in temperament and doctrinal emphasis. Their style of preaching was also different. Wesley was the cultured Oxford don, who tended to address his presentation of the gospel more to the reason and conscience than to the emotions. Whitefield, on the other hand, had all the gifts of a Demosthenes, breaking into impassioned oratory, using his powerful voice with dramatic effect.

The main point of difference, however, between the two men was doctrinal. Wesley, close as he was on many points to the Calvinistic position, could not accept the doctrine of predestination. Wesley's theology was more in line here with that of the Dutch theologian, Arminius, who had taught that all men might, if they would, receive salvation through repentance and faith, and that predestination was limited to the Divine foreknowledge.

In 1740, Wesley published his famous sermon on "Free Grace", in which he argued strongly that God's grace was extended to all. He rejected the thought that a section of mankind, by virtue of an unchangeable and irresistible Divine decree, was inevitably damned. Whitefield was in America at the time but he and Wesley were soon in correspondence. In Whitefield's eyes, Wesley appeared to be preaching universal redemption, whereas Wesley regarded Whitefield's strongly Calvinistic emphasis as robbing man of any sense of moral responsibility. Although they did not mince their words in the letters that passed between them, neither Whitefield nor Wesley welcomed an open breach of fellowship. For all that, the years 1740-1741 certainly strained the friendship between the two men and, to some extent, marked the parting of the ways. From 1743 onwards, the supporters of Whitefield were known as Calvinistic Methodists. As time went on, these two great leaders recognised more and more that the work of spreading the gospel was their primary concern, while on controversial issues they must agree to differ. In 1750, the two men interchanged pulpits, Whitefield preaching at the Foundry and Wesley at Moorfields.

The winter of 1768/69 was the last that Whitefield spent in England and it seems that, on a number of occasions, he met for fellowship with both John and Charles Wesley. After their last meeting, on February 27th 1769, John Wesley recorded:

I had one more agreeable conversation with my old friend and fellow-labourer, George Whitefield. His soul appeared vigorous still, but his body is sinking apace; and unless God interposes with His mighty hand, he must soon finish his labours.

Whitefield died in 1770 in Georgia and, on November 18th, John Wesley preached memorial sermons, in which he expressed deep sorrow at the passing of such a noble Christian warrior.

Throughout the controversy between these two men the Countess had assumed the role of mediator, although it is clear her real sympathies lay with Whitefield. She urged them to heal any breach that existed between them and to promote Christian unity. A. H. New, in his

biography, says of the Countess: "Her ladyship possessed the true spirit of the Evangelical Alliance, a century before such a thing was realised."

The relationship between John Wesley and the Countess was strained almost to breaking point, following resolutions passed by Wesley's Conference of preachers in August 1770. Lady Huntingdon protested strongly against the minutes of the Conference, that gave great offence to the Calvinistic Methodists as a whole. On August 18th, the Countess, accompanied by one or two of her preachers, arrived at Burlington near Bristol, to stay at the home of a Mr. James Ireland, a man who was a true friend to both parties in the prevailing religious controversy. John Wesley was also in Bristol at the time, and fully expected to accompany the Countess to Wales, where the second anniversary of her College was about to be celebrated. Lady Huntingdon, however, had made up her mind that she would exclude Wesley from any of her pulpits, so long as he adhered to the resolutions passed at the recent Conference of preachers. She wrote to him to that effect. Wesley did not reply to the letter, but promptly left Bristol for Cornwall and never again preached in the chapels belonging to the Countess.

The Calvinistic controversy had its repercussions on the College that the Countess had founded at Trevecca. The principal, known at that time as the "headmaster", had had close connections with John Wesley and was favourably disposed towards his theological position. He was ready to defend Wesley against the attacks of his opponents. The Countess, on the other hand, had made it clear that whoever subscribed to Wesley's doctrines must resign from her College. The upshot of all this was a lively correspondence between the "headmaster", the Rev. Joseph Benson, John Wesley and the Countess. To add fuel to the fire, Benson wrote concerning the baptism of the Holy Spirit in a way that the Countess regarded as unscriptural. Lady Huntingdon did not relent; she was determined that anyone expressing Arminian sympathies should quit her College. Wesley encouraged Benson to stand his ground. The result was that the "headmaster" was summarily dismissed by the Countess. At the same time, Lady Huntingdon duly acknowledged the talents and piety of Mr. Benson. She dismissed him on the grounds that he would be likely to indoctrinate the students with his theological views.

Since the Rev. Joseph Benson had been warmly commended to the Countess by the Rev. John Fletcher, the first president of the College, it was understandable that the two should be in correspondence at this time. The Vicar of Madeley was saddened by the way his friend had been treated by the Countess. He wrote to her Ladyship, on January 1st 1771, making it clear that he also believed that salvation was offered to all, and may be received or rejected by men. Therefore, he said, if such views were anathema, he, too, must quit the College. He wrote:

For my part I am no party man. In the Lord I am your servant, and that of your every student; but I cannot give up the honour of being connected with my old friends, who, notwithstanding their failings, are entitled to my respect, gratitude, and assistance, could I occasionally give them any. Mr. Wesley shall always be welcome to my pulpit, and I shall gladly bear my testimony in his, as well as Mr. Whitefield's. But if your Ladyship forbid your students to preach for the one, and offer them to preach for the other at every turn, and if a master is discarded for believing that Christ died for all — then prejudice reigns, charity is cruelly wounded and party spirit shouts, prevails and triumphs.

Subsequently, Fletcher resigned as president of the College.

The controversy was now at fever pitch. Lady Huntingdon sent a circular letter inviting a large number of Calvinistic clergy to meet at Bristol, and to challenge the Wesleyan Conference either to revoke their last minutes or sign a formal protest against them. The Countess wrote once more to John Wesley who, in his reply, contended that for forty years he had consistently preached one body of doctrine and there was no question of going back on his views. John Fletcher was incensed by Lady Huntingdon's attitude. The Countess, however, pursued her course of action, relentlessly, although she did endeavour to meet her critics' objections concerning the mode of her campaign.

The projected Conference duly met at Bristol on August 6th 1771. The views of both the Calvinists and the Arminians were clearly and frankly expressed. Particular credit is due to the Rev. Walter Shirley, chaplain to Lady Huntingdon, whose restraint was favourably commented upon by all present. John Wesley drew up a declaration that demonstrated that he and his followers fervently believed in the sole merits of Christ's atoning sacrifice for salvation, and that any thought of justification by works was utterly abhorrent to them. Mr. Shirley and his friends welcomed this declaration and admitted they had been over-hasty in condemning Wesley.

It seemed as though the storms of controversy had at last died down. It was all the more unfortunate, therefore, that five letters which had passed between John Fletcher and Walter Shirley should have been published, with John Wesley's full approval, shortly after the Conference was over. Thereby controversy was unnecessarily revived and the eventual outcome was virtually a total cleavage between the Wesleyans and the Calvinistic Methodists. Augustus Toplady, a Calvinistic vicar and author of the hymn, "Rock of Ages", entered into the controversy with unseemly vigour, and did not enhance his reputation by publishing a scurrilous pamphlet entitled, *An Old Fox Tarred and Feathered*. As a controversialist, Toplady was particularly bitter and intemperate.

It is to be regretted that such shadows fell upon the bright hopes of the Evangelical Revival. Yet, human nature being what it is, such contentions were almost inevitable. Obviously there were faults on both sides. Both Wesleyans and Calvinistic Methodists were at times guilty of misrepresentation and over-statement. Thank God that, in spite of these unfortunate incidents, "a religious revival had burst forth which changed after a time the whole tone of English society". Evangelical Christians in the eighteenth century, like their counterparts today, would have been well advised to take to their hearts the dictum attributed to Richard Baxter — "In things essential, unity; in things doubtful, liberty; in all things, charity." There are matters on which men of "like precious faith" must be prepared to differ, and yet remain in close fellowship.

CHAPTER 9

THE COUNTESS AND HER CONNEXION

In the world of today, we have become familiar with evangelistic enterprises that bear the name of their founder. A case in point is the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. There is precedent for this in the eighteenth century. Evangelical leaders tended to draw together those closely associated with them. Men such as John Wesley and Rowland Hill had linked with them a "Connexion", made up of men and women who had declared their willingness to support them in their work wholeheartedly, and to take their directions from them. The word "Connexion" always implied definite association for specific work. Thus the Countess of Huntingdon built up over the years a Connexion comprising such men as occupied her pulpits and others who rallied round these men.

There can hardly have been, since apostolic days, a Connexion comparable with that associated with the Countess. It included such eminent divines as George Whitefield, the saintly Fletcher, Vicar of Madeley, and first President of the Countess's College, and Augustus Toplady, Fletcher's antagonist in doctrinal controversy. Amongst others in the group were Henry Venn, at first curate of Clapham and later Vicar of Huddersfield, the saintly John Berridge, William Grimshaw, James Hervey, William Romaine, Thomas Haweis, the Hon. Walter Shirley, Lady Huntingdon's cousin, the Countess of Chesterfield and Lady Anne Erskine. This was truly a remarkable collection of consecrated men and women, each of whom exercised a powerful influence in their day. It might be appropriate to record here an anecdote relating to two of the men mentioned. Shortly before his induction as Vicar of Madeley, Fletcher decided to call upon John Berridge, at Everton, a man he had always wanted to meet. Fletcher introduced himself as a new convert, who wished to obtain the benefit of Berridge's experience and advice. Berridge detected a foreign accent and asked Fletcher from what country he had come. When he learned he hailed from Berne, in Switzerland, Berridge said: "Then, probably, you can give me some account of a young countryman of yours, one John Fletcher, who has lately preached a few times for the Wesleys, and of whose talents, learning and piety they both speak in terms of high eulogy. Do you know him?" "Yes, sir, I know him intimately," came the reply "and did those gentlemen know him so well, they would not speak of him in such terms, for which he is more obliged to their partial friendship than to his own merits." "You surprise me," replied Mr. Berridge, "in speaking so coldly of a countryman in whose praise they are so warm." "I have the best reason," he replied, "for speaking of him as I do — I *am* John Fletcher!" "If you be John Fletcher," exclaimed Berridge, you must do me the favour of taking my pulpit tomorrow." Thus began a warm friendship between these two men, both of whom were closely involved with the Countess and her Connexion.

Before her death Lady Huntingdon was concerned to make provision for the continuance of her work. In her lifetime she personally superintended the work, retaining in her own hands the sole power of appointing and removing ministers and of selecting managers to supervise the secular affairs of her chapels. At the invitation of the Countess, in 1790, a number of ministers and laymen formed themselves into an Association to devise some means of maintaining the oversight of her Connexion. The rather cumbersome title of their endeavours was, "Plan of an Association for Uniting and Perpetuating the Connexion of the Right Honourable the Countess Dowager of Huntingdon". In brief, the scheme made provision for

dividing the Connexion into 23 districts, each with its own Committee, which would, in turn, send representatives to a yearly Conference. The scheme met with opposition from several quarters, particularly from Thomas Haweis and Lady Anne Erskine. The Countess reluctantly abandoned the scheme, as many would feel, to the detriment of the future of her Connexion.

A. H. New comments:

Had the Connexion been regularly organised and legally established during her lifetime, and had the Trustees and ministers been compelled to adhere to a constituted order, the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion would, at this time, have occupied one of the most conspicuous positions among the religious denominations in England.

By her will, dated January 11th 1790, the Countess bequeathed "all her chapels, houses and furniture therein, and all the residue of her estates and effects to Thomas Haweis and Janetta Payne, his wife; Lady Anne Erskine, and John Lloyd;" and directed that, on the death of any one of them, the survivors should appoint one other person to fill the vacancy, so that there should always be four Trustees. In point of fact, on Lady Huntingdon's death in 1791, the superintendency of her chapels devolved upon Lady Anne Erskine, together with the financial administration, whilst Thomas Haweis undertook the pulpit supply.

Lady Anne was very similar in many ways to the Countess, and was better acquainted with her wishes than anyone else. Up to the time of her death, in 1804, she presided over the Connexion with great wisdom, displaying both energy and prudence, tenderness of spirit and firmness of purpose. It has been said of her that she possessed the talents of the Erskine family, together with the catholicity of Lady Huntingdon.

It has been claimed that no fewer than 200 chapels and mission stations were opened by, or linked with, the Connexion, during the lifetime of the Countess. In 1828, nearly forty years after her death, there were some 35,000 people regularly attending these places of worship, cared for by 72 officiating ministers. In 1851, according to the national religious census, there were 109 chapels claiming to belong to the Connexion at that time, and 29,679 people attending. But, in the previous year, according to Connexional records, there were only 30 churches in the Central Trust and another 40 associated churches in local trusts. In subsequent years, however, many of these chapels have either closed or been absorbed into larger denominations. At the present time there are only 23 chapels linked with the Connexion in Britain, with eighteen pastors and a total membership of below one thousand. The liturgical form of service that once characterised churches in the Connexion has been dropped, and the churches themselves are conducted on Free Church lines. The affairs of the Connexion are still managed by a body of Trustees, who are required to subscribe to the lengthy fifteen-article Calvinistic statement of faith, and whose approval for ministerial settlements has to be obtained.

It would be difficult, in the present spiritual climate, to predict what the future holds, as far as the Connexion is concerned. Among the older church members, in particular, there are a number who greatly value the historic links, which they have with the Countess. The remaining churches, however, may yet be linked with other evangelical groups. The Trustees still have considerable trust funds to administer and they, as well as many in the local churches, have a genuine desire to rediscover and re-emphasise those basic truths which lay at the heart of the Evangelical Revival, and which were so dear to the Countess herself.

Whilst liberal theologians would dismiss the Fifteen Articles of the Connexion as being outmoded, conservative evangelicals appreciate their strong Biblical emphasis. It is, of course, a fact that credal statements reflect issues current at the time of their formulation. The

Nicene Creed is a classic example. This was drawn up at the Council of Nicea, in 325, to defend the orthodox faith against the heretical teaching of Arius and his followers, regarding the Person of Christ. The Thirty-Nine Articles represent an attempt on the part of the Church of England to define its doctrinal position, in the light of controversies raging in the sixteenth century. The Westminster Confession, in the seventeenth century, placed indelibly on Presbyterianism the stamp of John Calvin. The Fifteen Articles of the Countess of Huntingdon and her Connexion reflect issues that were prominent at that time, and this accounts for phraseology that we should probably hesitate to use today.

The Fifteen Articles stamp the Countess and her Connexion as avowedly Protestant. Indeed, Article No. 13, that originally described the Pope as, "that Antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition", language derived from Reformation times, proved a stumbling block to some, who otherwise might have entered the Connexion. A few years ago, however, these offensive words were deleted from the Article, with the permission of the Charity Commissioners.

The Fifteen Articles not only stamp the Countess as a Protestant but, equally, as one in the tradition of John Calvin. The scriptural doctrine of predestination is spelt out clearly in Article No. 6. Another Article points out that, "the condition of man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and good works to faith and calling upon God".

Probably the Article that has caused most concern to ministers in the Connexion is the one dealing with baptism. We are left in no doubt as to the position of the Countess. She was an unrepentant paedo-Baptist. She believed, no doubt greatly influenced by her upbringing in the Established Church, that children were right and proper subjects for baptism. In taking up this position Lady Huntingdon was, of course, in the tradition of many of the Reformers, who saw in baptism the counterpart of circumcision under the Old Covenant. In recent years, a number of men ministering in Connexional churches have had serious qualms of conscience over this Article, since they themselves have favoured baptism being confined to believers. The Trustees of the Connexion, sympathising with the problem, have usually suggested that, whereas a minister in a church of the Connexion must be prepared to recognise the place of infant baptism, he should not be compelled against his conscience to carry it out. If, however, Christian parents in his congregation clearly wish their child to be baptised, then he must be prepared to allow the ordinance to be carried out, even though he himself may not be involved.

We have taken a cursory glance at only a few of the Fifteen Articles. For those who would like to study them in greater depth they are included, in full, as an appendix to this book.

The Countess and her advisers also drew up a series of rules for the "societies" in her Connexion. The wording of Rule VI sounds somewhat quaint to our sophisticated generation:

That an un-humbled disputatious spirit, and a vain conformity to the world in card-playing, dancing, frequenting play-houses, and places of such-like carnal amusements, horse-races, clubs for entertainment, or alehouses or taverns, without necessary business, lightly and profanely using the name of the Lord in common conversation, and any other disorderly carriage, be sufficient grounds of complaint and removal.

These rules were printed for the use of the societies in 1785. They may sound to us a trifle legalistic, but there can be no doubt that the over-riding concern of the Countess was the preservation of the purity of the Church and the edification of its members.

On October 24th 1981, a meeting was held in London, in celebration of the Connexion's bicentenary. The present Countess, Margaret Lane, expressed greetings and an historic lecture entitled, "Revival—Then and Now", was delivered by the Rev. Gilbert W. Kirby.

The Trustees of the Connexion meet about four times a year under the chairmanship of the most senior in office of their number. One of the Trustees serves as honorary secretary and another as honorary treasurer. The Connexion's solicitor is sometimes present by invitation at a meeting of the Trustees.

The Trustees are bound to act in accordance with "the Scheme", the constitution of the Connexion as legally adopted in 1899, and to subscribe themselves to the Fifteen Articles of Faith. They are entrusted with widespread powers. The chapels are vested in them and they have authority to appoint and revoke the appointment of ministers at their discretion.

During the course of its history the Connexion has had tenuous links with the Free Church of England. In fact, one of its founders was a prominent Connexional minister and he was supported in its formation by ministers on the liturgical wing of the Connexion. At one time, the possibility of actual union between the two bodies was considered, but nothing came of this, in spite of the fact that a trust deed setting forth terms of union was enrolled in Chancery in 1863.

The first ordination service outside the jurisdiction of the Church of England authorities was held on Sunday March 9th 1783, at Spa Fields Chapel, in North London. The whole service lasted more than five hours. One of the ordinands read out the Fifteen Articles of Faith which, it was stated, would henceforth be signed by all ministers of the Connexion. It was pointed out that these Articles embodied the evangelical doctrine contained in the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England. We do not know who was originally responsible for drawing them up but they do, of course, have strong affinities with the Westminster Confession of 1643-1646.

CHAPTER 10

MISSIONARY VISION

The first American Indian preacher to visit these shores, the Rev. Samson Occum, brought with him letters of introduction to the Countess of Huntingdon. He arrived in the summer of 1766 and sought to raise funds for the support of an Indian charity school which had been established by the founder of Dartmouth College. Occum was readily accepted and preached for George Whitefield on several occasions. Lady Huntingdon was generous in her support of his work and entertained him frequently. She caught a real vision of the spiritual need of the Mohegan Indians, commenting: "I hope yet to have it in my power, if the Lord should see fit to continue me in His service, to extend some aid to this interesting people."

Several years passed before the Countess was able to fulfil her ambition. Early in 1771, a Mr. Cornelius Winter, who had accompanied George Whitefield to America, arrived in England carrying Whitefield's will by which he had bequeathed to Lady Huntingdon the Orphan House in Georgia which catered for Africans. The Countess immediately took a keen interest in this work and purchased additional estates in Georgia. She circularised the students and former students of her College, putting before them the need for missionary work in America and inviting them to confer with her at Trevecca. On October 9th 1772, a number of students were solemnly commissioned for missionary service overseas and a day of prayer was observed in all the Countess's chapels.

The missionaries embarked on the vessel that was to convey them to their destination on October 27th 1772, and sailed down the Thames to Gravesend where a vast company had assembled to bid them farewell. The ship remained for several days at Gravesend but later left for America where, after a prosperous voyage, they all arrived safely. The Countess had gone to immense trouble in the interests of her missionaries, setting out clearly a daily routine which she recommended to them on the voyage in order that they "might foster each other's piety and zeal". Friends of George Whitefield were quick to welcome them in the land of their adoption. They proceeded to the Orphan House, which had been fitted up for their reception, but they did not confine themselves to this work. Soon they were travelling across the country, making contact with settlers in remote areas, visiting nomadic Indian tribes and preaching the gospel to Africans. The Countess was greatly heartened by the reports she received. She said:

The invitations which I have for our ministry in various parts of America are so kind and affectionate that it looks as if we have our way free through the whole continent... Some great, *very* great work is intended by the Lord among the heathen. Should this appear I should rejoice to go myself to establish a College for the Indian nations. I can't help thinking that before I die the Lord will have me there, if only to make coats and garments for the poor Indians. I am looking when some from among us shall be called to the Jews — but the Gentiles by us will surely hear the voice of the Lord.

Such was the missionary zeal of Lady Huntingdon, now in her sixty-seventh year. Her mind was ever devising some fresh scheme whereby she might glorify God. As her biographer Alfred New comments: "She was far in advance of her times, and represented in her own person the home missionary, the foreign missionary, and the missionary to the Jews!"

Unfortunately, the subsequent story of the Orphan Home in Georgia is not a happy one. The Countess's affairs were mismanaged and she was involved in a great deal of unnecessary expense. Not many months after the arrival of her missionaries the property was destroyed by fire. Then followed the American War of Independence, as an outcome of which the missionaries were forced to leave the country. When the war was over, in 1783, the Countess again turned her attention to the needs of the American Indians and sought to establish a fund for setting up a mission on a large scale. In spite of many frustrations there were fruitful results from Lady Huntingdon's ministers and many Africans were converted.

On one occasion, when George Whitefield was preaching in Charlestown, South Carolina, two young Africans appeared with the express purpose of upsetting the meeting. One of these young men, John Marrant, was deeply convicted by the powerful message of the preacher and he eventually came over to England and, in 1785, was ordained by Lady Huntingdon's chaplain, Thomas Wills, at the Vineyards Chapel, Bath. Marrant returned to North America and eventually ministered to the African community in Nova Scotia. This community consisted of former slaves, who had fought with the British in the War of Independence in exchange for freedom and land at its end. As the Americans were victorious these loyalists were forced to leave, and the British found them a home in Nova Scotia. The promises given them were not kept — they were not given land and were employed as farm labourers — the climate was much too severe for them, and the local people did not want them there.

Meanwhile the anti-slavery movement was gaining pace in Britain. Granville Sharp, formerly a Government civil servant, became a leading opponent of slavery and he planned a Province of Freedom for freed slaves. The Clapham Sect, a group of evangelicals in the Church of England that included Wilberforce, campaigned for such a colony in Sierra Leone and this was established in 1786. The first 450 settlers, mostly former slaves living in Britain, arrived in Sierra Leone to establish the Province of Freedom in 1787. The venture met with great problems but, in 1790, the Sierra Leone Company was formed and founded a settlement with the 48 survivors.

With the promised support of the British Government, the Sierra Leone Company agreed to re-settle the disillusioned "Nova Scotians" in Sierra Leone. They left Nova Scotia in January 1792 and, after many had died of fever on the voyage, 1131 arrived off Sierra Leone on March 28th. Some pioneers went on shore to make a landing space. They then disembarked and marched towards the forest, their preachers leading them, singing from the Countess's hymn book:

*Awake, and sing the song
Of Moses and the Lamb;
Wake every heart and every tongue
To praise the Saviour's name.*

Chapels were also set up and the Connexional form of worship they had been familiar with in Nova Scotia was followed.

A new settlement was then founded and named Freetown. After struggling successfully for a few weeks they were joined by the remnant of the earlier settlers. Three groups of dissenters were represented among the Nova Scotians: Baptists, Methodists, and Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion. Marrant had died in 1791 and Cato Perkins became leader of the Huntingdon congregation with William Ash the leading preacher. These African Christians

were back in the land of their fathers and as they faced the challenge of starting new life on African soil, they did so in the strength and courage that their Christian faith afforded them.

The population of Freetown was resilient in the face of hardship and the three dissenting groups put up churches, each retaining a separate identity. When the colony became established, they consistently avoided the Anglican churches. The conversion of the Huntingdonians had resulted directly from the Evangelical Revival and they had been instructed by Marrant and others in Nova Scotia. A. F. Walls, in *Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion*, published in 1959, stated:

Christianity was for them dynamic and personal; no matter of doctrine could be indifferent; the personal experience of the individual and his sharing in fellowship with others — the sense of being the people of God — was a matter of profound importance.

To the loyalist Nova Scotians were added 550 Maroons. They were natives of Jamaica, some former slaves, who had conducted a guerrilla war against the British settlers and planters who took their lands. Following the intervention of Walpole they made peace, but were transported to Nova Scotia in 1796.

An Anglican dissenter, a Mr Chamberlain, was employed to educate them and lead them in daily public worship, and many were converted. The Maroons were resettled in Sierra Leone in 1800 and, although they set up their own churches, they had much in common with the Connexion. When Cato Perkins died in 1805, he was succeeded as leader of the Connexion by a Maroon, John Ellis.

In spite of many frustrations this small Christian Church, transplanted on to African soil from Nova Scotia flourished. A report of the Sierra Leone Company in 1794 stated:

There are five or six black preachers among the Nova Scotians, raised up from their own body, who are not without considerable influence and it is supposed that the discipline they preserve in their little congregations has contributed materially to the maintenance of the general morals of the community.

This comparatively small group of African Christians built both churches and schools. Meanwhile all contact was lost with the Connexional churches in England until 1825. That year a woman from Sierra Leone on a visit to England made contact with the Connexion. She had in her possession her "Huntingdon" church membership card and she also brought a letter of greeting from the Rev. John Ellis.

The Connexion in England must have been fascinated by the news of the existence of a group of churches in Sierra Leone bearing the same name and with the same heritage. Little contact, however, seems to have been maintained in the next 14 years, although a letter from Huntingdonians, in Sierra Leone, appeared in the 1828-29 Connexional magazine.

Then, one Sunday morning in 1839, members of the Countess of Huntingdon's church in Whitechapel were surprised to see two African strangers in the congregation. They were still more surprised to find they carried hymnbooks similar to those used by the rest of the congregation. After the service the visitors made their way to the vestry and, showing their membership cards, introduced themselves as belonging to the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion, Sierra Leone! Two midweek meetings were called in London at which these men, James Gallon and John Sykes, told the story of their own Connexion. For almost 50 years a Christian community bearing the honoured name of the Countess had existed in Sierra Leone,

of which most Christians in England had been unaware. Meanwhile, a true “apostolic succession” of ministers of the gospel, in direct succession to George Whitfield, had been ministering to these African Christians. Collections were taken up, amounting to £22. 13s 6d, to aid their churches, and they also took back with them Bibles, hymnbooks, tracts and clothing.

In the ensuing years several more visits were made by Christians from Sierra Leone and, occasionally, these were returned by members of the English Connexion. However, it was not until 1899 that the first white “missionary”, the Rev. William Groves, went to give oversight to the work, following the establishment of the Sierra Leone Mission. The SLM {as it is called} aimed to give more definite and regular support from the English Connexion.

From their inception, the Huntingdon churches in Sierra Leone have remained a self-governing and independent body of churches. None-the-less, the Sierra Leone Connexion continues to hold the Countess herself in the very highest esteem. In meetings and conversations her name is often mentioned with pride and gratitude. Parents may still ask for a baby daughter to be baptised as Selina. Organisations within churches have the tradition of using names such as the Selina Society. On Connexional occasions, members sing choruses such as “Huntingdonians praise the Lord” and “We are Huntingdonians”.

It is significant perhaps that, whereas many Connexional churches in England are known, in their localities, as an Evangelical Free Church or just as a “Free Church”, every Connexional church in Sierra Leone, even if prefaced by the name of a saint, is known widely as Huntingdon. This tribute is fitting in a country where, over the past two centuries, a sizeable number of men and women have come to owe their Christian heritage, under God, to the Countess of Huntingdon.

Yet the Sierra Leone Connexion has, in overall terms, remained small and entirely located in the Freetown peninsular. It is recorded that in 1851 there were 11 chapels, five weekday schools {510 pupils}, three Sunday schools {600 children} and 48 preachers. By 1902 there were 13 chapels, 10 weekday schools {600 pupils}, six Sunday schools {538 children} and 36 preachers. This situation altered only slightly over the course of the twentieth century, despite many other changes and disturbances within the country itself.

Historically, the Sierra Leone Connexion has been organised into circuits, each of which has a circuit superintendent in charge of the churches in that area. There is also an annual conference at which officers are elected, including the Chairman and General Superintendent, who has overall charge of the Connexion.

The Sierra Leone Mission has always sought to faithfully support the work of the gospel in Sierra Leone. Missionaries continued to be sent out until 1979, when the last, the Rev. Tom Rowley, returned home. Now, although there is no English representative based there, fellowship is maintained by regular visits and by correspondence. Visits from members of the Sierra Leone Connexion to this country are also encouraged when circumstances make this possible.

The country, including the church, is very poor and financial help has been given for many years, through the SLM, for ministerial training, ministers’ salaries and pensions. The SLM also assists Christian education, mostly by paying teachers’ salaries in primary schools, where this is not undertaken by the government. There has been a need, too, for help with the repair

and improvement of church buildings and schools, and particular gifts have been directed to building manses. Agricultural projects have been supported by individual churches, although the SLM is unable and would not see it as its responsibility to undertake development work. It does, however, seek to support evangelistic outreach into the villages and young people's work. It has links with other evangelical organisations in Sierra Leone, notably Scripture Union and the Evangelical Fellowship of Sierra Leone. More recently, shipments have been sent out by the churches in England of goods needed by the churches in Sierra Leone and their members. The English Connexion is represented in Sierra Leone by Agents, who are themselves leading members of the Connexion.

Assisting with education has long been seen as a high priority. Like the Connexion in England, the Sierra Leone Connexion is much too small to train its own ministers. Although some men have transferred from other denominations, the Sierra Leone Connexion has, to a great extent, relied on untrained men who have taken up ministry after retiring from other work. Mindful that training men for the ministry was a major aim of the Countess, the Trustees of the English Connexion have sought to help men and women train as pastors and evangelists at the Sierra Leone Bible College. The Bible College opened at Jui in 1964 and the first student was sponsored by the SLM in the late 1960s. Since then an increasing number of students have received support, aided by funds made available annually by the Cheshunt Foundation {which originated in Trevecca College set up by the Countess}. During the academic year 1999/2000 the Sierra Leone Bible College became The Evangelical College of Theology {or TECT}, of which the SLM is an Associate Proprietor. The SLM has also supported a number of students at Theological Hall in Freetown.

The last decade of the twentieth century was one of great turmoil for both the country and the Sierra Leone Connexion. In 1992 the Huntingdon churches celebrated their bicentenary with a procession through the streets of Freetown followed by a rally and many other celebrations. But just a few weeks later, a coup heralded nearly four years of military rule. From 1992 fighting spread to most parts of the country and over a million people were displaced from their homes. In early 1996 a civilian government was elected, only to be overthrown by rebels in May 1997. It was ten more years before some stability returned to the country with a UN brokered peace deal eventually allowing fresh elections to take place in 2002.

All churches in Sierra Leone were affected by the fighting. Lives were lost, other members were injured, and there was much destruction of property and loss of livelihood. Many fled from their homes into the bush or to Freetown. Some were displaced into refugee camps, which increased in size enormously. Almost everyone showed great courage and fortitude in the face of suffering and trauma. During the fighting the English Connexion set up a hardship fund to provide money for purchasing rice, which proved to be of real benefit. Since then, its efforts have turned to helping with rehabilitation and the work of repair.

One of the most remarkable developments of recent times has been the growth and outreach of the Sierra Leone Connexion in a way that is inspirational to its sister Connexion in the UK. By 2002 the number of churches had grown to 27 and the number of circuits from three to six. There is a considerable enthusiasm for evangelism, especially among the bible trained ministers and schoolteachers. This has resulted in many new converts, especially in the eastern part of the peninsular. At the time of writing, a project to build a new church and headquarters for the Sierra Leone Connexion right in the heart of Freetown is underway, funded by the SLM.

Schools are being opened in the provinces, often leading to the establishment of Mission stations in villages where previously only a combination of traditional religious beliefs and nominal Islam has been the norm. The SLM has supported some of this work, but it places considerable pressure on funds and not all requests can be met. Currently, some 34 teachers in 10 primary schools are supported by the SLM.

A continuing challenge for the SLM is how to use its limited resources to best effect. Its principal aim remains that of encouraging the spread of the gospel in Sierra Leone, through its support of the Sierra Leone Connexion. New initiatives aimed at strengthening our level of support for the ministry and schools work are constantly being explored. The English Connexion is concerned to develop a partnership approach, being aware of the extent to which folk in the UK have been greatly blessed and encouraged by the love, prayers and example of our brothers and sisters in Sierra Leone who have endured so much. Up to date news of developments in Sierra Leone can always be found in the periodical publications "Voice" and the Connexional Newsletter.

CHAPTER 11

THE LAST OF THE REVIVALISTS

Her biographer, A. H. New, describes the Countess of Huntingdon as "the last of the revivalists". She certainly outlived the spiritual "giants" of the eighteenth century — George Whitefield, John Wesley and his brother, Charles. Ingham, Hervey, Shirley, Fletcher and many others predeceased her. In the words of New: "She stood alone, like an aged tree around which storms had played and devastated."

Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, could hardly have been described as robust, but she was blessed with a strong constitution and an iron will. She survived a number of illnesses and encompassed a vast amount of work. By the year 1790, however, the weight of years was beginning to tell. It became obvious to her friends that her infirmities were rapidly increasing. There were times when the Countess was so weak she was scarcely able to write. A painful inflammation in her eyes almost deprived her of sight, and she suffered a good deal of bodily pain. The passing of so many of her friends and contemporaries saddened her. The death of her son, the tenth Earl, on October 2nd 1789, left its mark upon her. She mourned particularly over the fact that he had made no profession of faith. As they saw the strength of the Countess declining, her friends became particularly concerned for the future of the work, which she had initiated and supported so generously over the years.

There was the College at Trevecca, for example, which had been almost entirely financed by the Countess herself. In this case, as we have already noted, arrangements were put in hand whereby Trustees were appointed to manage its affairs. There was also the Connexion. Throughout her life the Countess retained in her own hands the power of appointing or dismissing ministers. Then, towards the end of her life, she made provision for the future, giving serious and prolonged thought as to the best means of disposing of her chapels and residences. She was conscious that her days were numbered, and realised she might not survive long enough to enable Trust Deeds to be drawn up. She, therefore, bequeathed the chapels and houses to certain individuals, giving them unrestricted power over them, in the hope that they would be used as they had been in her lifetime.

Although bodily the Countess seemed to grow more frail, her mind remained as keen and clear as ever, and her heart glowed with heavenly love and peace. It seemed, at times, as though she caught glimpses of the heavenly mansions. Her faith in Christ never faltered. Towards the end of November 1790 she broke a blood vessel, and this marked the beginning of her last illness. She continued, however, with the help of Lady Erskine, and her secretary, Mr. Best, to manage her own affairs. She wrote to her friends and kept a lively interest in the churches of the Connexion. She referred to the members as her "dear children", and frequently expressed her deep love and concern for them all. Yet every week she grew more feeble and experienced much suffering, but always with the greatest patience. She said on one occasion to Lady Anne Erskine: "All the little ruffles and difficulties which surround me, and all the pains I am exercised with in this poor body, through mercy effect not the settled peace and joy of my soul."

Death held no terrors for the Countess; she saw it simply as "the putting off of her cloak". When asked how she was, she was heard to exclaim: "I am well. All is well - well forever. I see, wherever I turn my eyes, whether I live or die, nothing but victory." She looked forward

to her home-call with joyful anticipation. A few days before she took to her bed, she remarked:

The Lord has been present with my spirit this morning in a remarkable manner; what He means to convey to my mind, I know not; it may be my approaching departure; my soul is filled with glory; I am as if in the element of heaven itself.

Her doctor noted a deterioration in her condition on June 12th 1790, which suggested death would not be long delayed. Her friends watched over her with increasing solicitude. The Countess remained remarkably cheerful and animated. To the last she maintained an active interest in the spread of the gospel. She discussed with Dr. Thomas Haweis her hopes of sending out two missionaries to Tahiti in the South Seas, and expressed great concern when she learned that they could not proceed without Episcopal ordination, and that this had been denied them. Her physician, Dr. Lettson, in a letter to Lady Erskine after the death of the Countess referred repeatedly to the fortitude she showed during her last illness. He wrote:

How often have we seen her, elevated above the earth and earthly things, uttering this language, 'My work is done; I have nothing to do but to go to my heavenly Father!' ...Under long and painful days and nights of sickness, she never repined, but appeared constantly animated in prayer and thankfulness for the unutterable mercies she experienced. ...She exhibited the greatest degree of Christian composure that ever I witnessed; and that submission to Divine allotment, however severe and painful, which nothing but Divine aid could inspire.

The end came on June 17th 1791. The Countess died, in her eighty-fourth year, in her house in Spa Fields that adjoined her chapel. She was interred in the family vault at Ashby-de-la-Zouch. News of her death quickly spread and instantly cast a shadow of gloom over the metropolis. Thousands throughout Britain mourned over the loss they had sustained. Her principal chapels were hung with black and not only her own ministers, but scores of others, preached sermons in which tribute was paid to her memory. A medal was even struck, showing a likeness of the Countess on one side and, on the other, the words "I know that my Redeemer liveth", with the date of her death below.

All this points to the great esteem in which the Countess was held and to the remarkable influence she exerted throughout the country. So much could be said of her accomplishments. Undoubtedly she possessed great natural gifts. Through her sheer abilities she commanded the respect of some of the most distinguished men and women of her day, as well as of her own ministers, students and congregations. Her mind was keen and her energy boundless. Her conversational powers were outstanding. There was hardly a topic on which she could not converse with freedom and accuracy. She possessed an exceedingly generous nature and a breadth of sympathy that embraced human misery in all its aspects. She lived simply and economically. A tradesman who visited her on one occasion remarked afterwards:

What a lesson! Can a person of her noble birth, nursed in the lap of grandeur, live in such a house, so meanly furnished; and shall I, a tradesman, be surrounded with luxury and elegance! From this moment, I shall hate my house, my furniture and myself, for spending so little for God and so much in folly.

Gifted as she was by nature, the Countess will, however, be remembered supremely for her simple and enduring faith. Her religion was her life. She saw herself as a "sinner saved by grace" and never ceased to marvel at the Divine mercy shown towards her. She lived in heaven even though she laboured on earth. Her life was lived in constant communion with

God. Prayer was the language of her soul. Her biographer, A. H. New, in *The Coronet and the Cross*, pays this tribute:

Lady Huntingdon was a wonderful woman in an age fertile with illustrious characters. Many displayed more sparkling genius, wit and talents than she did; many exhibited feats of heroism that will encircle their names with unrivalled glory; but none mingled so many excellent features in their characters as did the Countess of Huntingdon. Descended from an ancient and honourable house; endowed with talents and accomplishments, which added lustre to an illustrious court; allied to a nobleman of great personal merit, and of renowned ancestry; and possessed of everything esteemed in the present life, Lady Huntingdon might have shone in the gay fashionable society of her times and secured for herself a niche in the great temple of literature, or of fashion. But what things were gain to her she counted loss for Christ. She valued all her exterior advantages, only for the influence they enabled her to exert; she gave up the blaze of rank, for the attractions of poverty and woe; she forsook the splendid court, to teach in the wretched hovel; and deemed it a greater honour to be permitted to induce the sinner to bow before Jesus, than to attract a crowd of noble flatterers and rule them by her charms. She sacrificed all for Christ; devoted herself, her time, property, influence and talents to the cause of religion; and presented to the world an example of what one pious woman can do to benefit man, and glorify God.

Macaulay commented that Lady Huntingdon was worthy to be enrolled in the noble hierarchy of the saints. Horace Walpole dubbed her "the patriarchess of the Methodists", whilst the Roman Catholic, John Henry Newman, paid this tribute:

She devoted herself, her means, her time, her thoughts to the cause of Christ. She did not spend her money on herself; she did not allow the homage paid to her rank to remain with herself; she passed these on, and offered them up to Him from whom her gifts came. She acted as one ought to act, who considered this life a pilgrimage, not a home — like some holy nun, or professed ascetic, who had neither hopes nor fears of anything but what was divine and unseen.

By any standards Lady Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, was an outstanding woman. The significance of her contribution to the Evangelical Revival can hardly be exaggerated. Knox singles her out as the pivotal figure. The fact she was a woman is all the more remarkable. Elliott Binns in *The Early Evangelicals* comments:

That one of the most active and influential leaders of the revival should have been a woman, and a woman of quality, was something that mere human foresight could never have anticipated, for women in the eighteenth century were expected to keep in the background and to submit to the guidance and control of their fathers and husbands.

CHAPTER 12

THE ELECT LADY... AND HER CHILDREN

We might well ask — What has Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, to teach the Christian Church today? However much we may admire her, we should be less than honest if we did not recognise certain elements in her character that we would not wish to emulate. Undoubtedly she was a forceful personality and, at times, appears to have acted in a somewhat dictatorial manner. She was in many respects a child of her age. She was a born aristocrat and acted in a way befitting her station at that time. No one today could, even if they so desired, wield the authority that Lady Huntingdon wielded.

Making full allowances for the changes which time has brought, there still remain lessons of abiding significance for us to learn from the remarkable life of this "elect lady". The most obvious lesson is that of dedication. Here was no nominal Christian paying formal respect to the faith, but one wholly committed to Christ and the gospel. Her commitment was demonstrated in practical ways. She gave unstintingly of her time, her talents, her energies and her resources in the cause of Christ. Her generosity knew no bounds. She was prepared to sell her most valuable jewels in order that a church might be built. She was ready to open her home to all and sundry, in order that those who otherwise might not hear the gospel had the opportunity of doing so. In an age when affluence is more evenly distributed, the Countess presents us with a challenge.

Another quality that she possessed to an unusual degree was that of discernment. Without formal theological training she was, nevertheless, fully aware of theological issues. It was no mere whim or fancy that led her to favour the emphasis of George Whitefield in preference to that of the Wesleys. She was herself convinced of the reformed position. Comparatively few women in history have displayed the sensitivity to theological issues that we see in the Countess.

We hasten to add that, with her discernment, Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, also displayed true catholicity. She knew her own position but she did not dismiss out of court those who differed from her. She did not, for example, refuse to show the hand of friendship to John and Charles Wesley even though she profoundly disagreed with them on a number of points.

Perhaps it was her statesmanship that marked out the Countess as one of the most outstanding Christian women of all time. She was quick to recognise that, if the Church was to receive adequate leadership, men must be theologically trained and so she founded a College to provide that facility. She was careful to follow Paul's example of endeavouring to infiltrate existing church structures with the gospel, before being forced to found a separate Christian community. Lady Huntingdon could well be described as a "reluctant separatist". Some among us tend to regard separatism as the first rather than last resort and, as a result, we have the tragic fragmentation of evangelical forces that characterises the modern scene, particularly in Britain and America today.

One might well ask where are the Countess's true successors to be found today? Is the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion with its 23 small churches the only memorial she has? Indeed, it is not. One could say that the strongly evangelical party within the Established Church owes not a little to the Countess. Those in this group would certainly emphasise the

doctrines so dear to her heart. All those men and women today who hold firmly to the faith of the Reformers, and who combine with it an evangelistic zeal, are children of "the elect lady". Some have felt it logical to separate from the "mainline" denominations, whilst others still remain in them, at least for the time being. One can but hope and pray that all such will, if and when the time comes, take their stand for the truth as fearlessly and uncompromisingly as the Countess herself, cost what it may.

In 1941, the Rev. Dr. J. S. Whale, at that time President of Cheshunt College, preached the Commemoration Sermon at Brighton — 150 years after the death of the Countess. His text, taken from the prophet Zechariah, was "Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live for ever?" In the course of a powerful address, Dr. Whale asked:

Is there no element of presumption in claiming descent from giants of other days? Can we be sure that our fathers would recognise their modern children? The appeal to the past, is a sword which cuts both ways, and we have only to remind ourselves of what the Countess of Huntingdon stood for throughout her long life, to realise that the prophets do not necessarily live for ever... We have no right, complacently to celebrate one hundred and fifty years of our history without examining ourselves, and asking how faithful we are to those evangelical principles of the eighteenth century which are the charter of our foundation, our very presupposition and our *raison d'être*. We are not here in the name of religious archaeology. It is not enough for us to claim, with Lecky, that the evangelical movement saved England from revolution and carried her through the Napoleonic wars.... 'Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live for ever?' They live only if their sons are truly quickened with the same spirit, the same sense of need, the same joy and peace in believing. And we may dare to celebrate our fathers in the faith two centuries ago if we understand and confess the truths which belong not to the eighteenth or to any particular century, but to all the ages and all the generations since the foundation of the world.

John Whale was right to remind his hearers that to recall the past for its own sake is futile. We recall the past in order to learn from it. We write of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, because we believe she has something to say to this generation.

Church history makes fascinating reading. God does not leave Himself without a witness. In days of moral and spiritual declension, He raises up those who will prove "valiant for truth". The Countess therefore stood in a great succession. In his will, George Whitefield referred to her as "that Elect Lady, that Mother in Israel, that union of true and undefined religion, the Right Hon. Selina, Countess of Huntingdon". As we look back, gratefully to such a stalwart, we are bound to ask "where are her counterparts today?" Are we ready not merely to cherish her memory but also to follow in her train?

In the words of Reginald Heber's hymn

*The Son of God goes forth to war,
A Kingly crown to gain;
His blood-banner streams afar;
Who follows in His train?
Who best can drink His cup of woe,
Triumphant over pain,
Who patient bears his cross below
He follows in His train.*

*A noble army, men and boys,
The matron and the maid,
Around the Saviour's throne rejoice
In robes of light arrayed.
They climbed the steep ascent of heaven
Through peril, toil and pain;
O God, to us may grace be given
To follow in their train.*

"Whose faith follow. . ."

Now, 200 years after the death of the Countess, the Connexion is numerically small. Only a handful of the Connexional churches have sizeable congregations. Geographically these are widely scattered — ranging from Middleton in the north, St. Ives in Cornwall, Ely in Cambridgeshire to Eastbourne in Sussex. The churches themselves differ somewhat in their ways of worship. Some have been influenced by the renewal movement and are relatively free in their expressions of worship, whilst others are committed to a strongly reformed position and follow a more traditional pattern. Some are strongly separatist, as far as other denominations are concerned, whilst others have links with their local fellowship of churches. As a denomination, the Connexion has disassociated itself from participation in the Inter Church Process. It is, however, a member of the Evangelical Alliance and its views are represented by the Free Churches group within Churches Together in England.

The Annual Conference of the Connexion is still well supported, bringing together delegates from the various churches. In recent years this has been held at the High Leigh Conference Centre, in Hertfordshire. Probably one of the most encouraging elements in the Connexion is its Annual Youth Conference, that is now held at the same time and place.

Each of the Trustees takes responsibility for watching over the interests of a group of churches. The Missionary Committee, which is elected annually at Conference, is responsible for the missionary interests of the Connexion, and for liaison with the Connexional churches in Sierra Leone. The Annual Conference also elects a president, who serves for one year, during which he or she endeavours to visit as many of the Connexional churches as possible.

APPENDIX

THE FIFTEEN ARTICLES OF FAITH

1. **OF GOD.** That there is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible. And in Unity of the Godhead there are three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

2. **OF THE SCRIPTURES.** That it pleased God, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to declare his will, and that the same should be committed unto writing; which is therefore called the Holy Scripture, which containeth all things necessary to salvation. The authority whereof doth not depend upon the testimony of man, but wholly upon God, its Author; and our assurance of the infallible truth thereof is from the inward work of the Holy Ghost, bearing witness with the Word in our Hearts.

3. **OF CREATION.** It pleased God for the manifestation of his glory, in the beginning to create the world, and all things therein; and having made man, male and female, after his own image, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, he gave them a command, not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, with a power to fulfil it, yet under a possibility of transgressing, being left to the liberty of their own will which was subject unto change.

4. **OF THE FALL OF MAN FROM ORIGINAL RIGHTEOUSNESS.** Our first parents, being seduced by the subtlety and temptations of Satan, sinned in eating the forbidden fruit; whereby they fell from their original righteousness, and became wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body. And, being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same corrupted nature conveyed to their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation.

5. **OF ORIGINAL SIN.** Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam, as the Pelagians do vainly talk, but it is the fault and corruption of the nature of every man that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is, as far as possible, gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil; so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the Spirit; and, therefore, in every person born into this world, it deserveth God's wrath and damnation. And this infection of nature doth remain, yea, in them that are regenerated, yet without dominion: and although there is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus, yet sin in them is evil as much as in others and, as such, receives Divine Fatherly chastisement.

6. **OF PREDESTINATION AND ELECTION.** Although the whole world is thus become guilty before God, it hath pleased him to predestinate some unto everlasting life. Predestination, therefore, to life, is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid), he hath constantly decreed by his counsel, secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ, out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honour. Wherefore they which are endued with so excellent a benefit of God, are called, according to God's purpose, by his spirit, working in due season; they, through grace, obey the call—they are justified

freely—they are made sons of God by adoption—they bear the image of Christ—they walk religiously in good works—and, at length by God’s mercy they attain to everlasting felicity.

7. OF CHRIST THE MEDIATOR. It pleased God, in his eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, his only begotten Son, to be the Mediator between God and man; the Prophet, Priest, and King, the Head and Saviour of his Church; unto whom he did, from all eternity, give a people to be his seed and to be by him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified and glorified. He, therefore, being very and eternal God, of one substance, and equal with the Father, did, when the fulness of time was come, take upon him man’s nature, yet without sin, being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the Virgin Mary. So that two whole, perfect and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion or confusion: which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man. This office of a Mediator and Surety he did most willingly undertake, which that he might discharge, he was made under the law, and did perfectly fulfil it by an obedience unto death; by which perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself on the cross, which he, through the Eternal Spirit, once offered up unto God, he has fully satisfied Divine Justice, and purchased not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of Heaven for all those whom the Father hath given him. To all of whom he doth, in his own time, and in his own way, certainly and effectually apply his purchased redemption; making intercession for them: and revealing unto them, through the Word, and by his Spirit, the mysteries of salvation; effectually enabling them to believe unto obedience; and governing their hearts by the same Word and Spirit, and overcoming all their enemies, by his Almighty power.

8. OF THE HOLY GHOST. The Holy Ghost is the third Person in the adorable Godhead, distinct from the Father and Son, yet of one substance, glory, and majesty with them; very and eternal God; whose office in the Church is manifold. It is he who illuminates the understanding to discern spiritual things, and guides us into all truth; so, that without his teaching, we shall never be effectually convinced of sin, nor be brought to the saving knowledge of God in Christ. And his teaching, whether it be by certain means which he ordinarily makes use of, or without means, is attended with an evidence peculiar and proper to itself, therefore stiled the demonstration of the Spirit and of power. By which divine power he not only enlightens the understanding, but gives a new turn or bias to the will and affections, moving and acting upon our hearts, and by his secret, energetic influence effecting those things which we could never attain nor accomplish by our own strength. Nor is his guidance less necessary in our lives and all our actions. Without his assistance we know not what to pray for, nor how to pray aright. He confirms us in all grace, and he is the Author of all holiness. It is he that assures us of our personal interest in Christ, and that sheds abroad the love of God in our hearts. He seals believers unto the day of redemption, and is himself the earnest of their future inheritance. He administers comfort to us in our temporal and spiritual distresses, by applying to our minds seasonable promises of God in Jesus Christ, which are yea and amen, and by receiving the things of Christ, and shewing them unto us. Thus he encourageth and refresheth us with the sense of the favour of God, fills us with joy unspeakable and full of glory, and is to abide with the Church forever.

9. OF FREE WILL. The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and good works, to faith and calling upon God; wherefore we have no power to do good works, pleasant and acceptable to God without the grace of God by Christ preventing us that we may have a good will, and working with us when we have that good will.

10. OF JUSTIFICATION. We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, by faith, and not for our own works or deservings. Wherefore that we are justified by faith only is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort. And this is done by pardoning our sins, and by accounting our persons as righteous, by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto us, which is received and rested upon by faith, which faith we have not of ourselves, but it is the gift of God.

11. OF SANCTIFICATION AND GOOD WORKS. They who are effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by His Word and Spirit dwelling in them; the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified, and they are more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord. Works, which are the fruits of faith, and follow after Justification, though they cannot put away our sins, nor endure the severity of God's judgment, yet are pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and spring out necessarily of a true and lively faith; insomuch, that by them a lively faith may be as evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit.

12. OF WORKS BEFORE JUSTIFICATION. Works done before the grace of Christ and the inspiration of his Spirit are not pleasant to God, forasmuch as they spring not of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; neither do they make men meet to receive grace; yea, rather for that they are not done as God hath willed and commanded them to be done we doubt not but they have the nature of sin.

13. OF THE CHURCH. The Catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ, the head thereof; and is, the spouse, the body, the fulness, of him that filleth all in all. The Visible Church consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children; to which Visible Church Christ hath given the ministry and ordinances of the gospel, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints in this life, to the end of the world; and doth by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise make them effectual thereunto.

There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ: nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof.

14. OF BAPTISM. Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptised into the Visible Church, but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, to be continued in the Church until the end of the world, which is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water on the person in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. This Sacrament ought to be administered but once to any person; and we also hold that infants may, and ought to be baptised in virtue of one or both believing parents, because the spiritual privilege of a right unto, and a participation of the initial seal of the covenant was granted by God to the infant seed of Abraham; which grant must remain firm for ever, without the Lord's own express revoking or abrogation of it; which can never be proved from Scripture that he has done. Again, they that have the thing signified, have a right to the sign of it; but children are capable of the grace signified in baptism, and some of them (we trust) are partakers of it, namely—such as die in their infancy; therefore they may and ought to be baptised. For these and other reasons we believe and maintain the lawfulness and expediency of infant Baptism.

15. OF THE LORD'S SUPPER. The Supper of the Lord is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves one to another, but rather it is a Sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, and of our redemption thereby, called the Lord's Supper, to be observed in his Church to the end of the world for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of himself in his death; the sealing of all benefits thereof to true believers; their spiritual nourishment and growth in him; their farther engagement in and to all duties which they owe unto him; and to be a bond and pledge of their communion with him and with each other, as members of his mystical body, insomuch, that to such as rightly and with faith receive the same, the bread which we break is a partaking of the body of Christ and likewise the cup of blessing is a partaking of the blood of Christ, though in substance and nature they still remain bread and wine, as they were before. Those, therefore, that are void of faith, though they do carnally and visibly eat the bread and drink the wine of this Sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, yet are in no wise partakers of Christ; but rather to their condemnation do eat and drink the sign or sacrament of so great a blessing.

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In addition to the above, there are numerous references to the Countess in the writings of her contemporaries and in the "lives" of such men as John Wesley, George Whitefield, John W. Fletcher and Howell Harris.

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