

So Runs The Tale: Hawker and Baring-Gould

One of the many endearing beliefs of Hawker of Morwenstow derives from the zig-zag moulding which is so marvellously exemplified in the Norman arches of Morwenstow church. He wrote in 1865:

'The zig-zag moulding that they call in a fine phrase chevron pattern is I say the Ripple on Gennesaret the sea of sighs the Lake of the Paraclete, and is significant of the Holy Spirit of God couching and gliding on the Water wherein we become Children of the Font.'

His best-known biographer, Sabine Baring-Gould, wrote on the same subject:

'When first I visited the church, I exclaimed at the beauty of the zig-zag moulding.

"Zig-zag! Zig-zag!" echoed the vicar scornfully. "Do you not see that it is near the font that this ornament occurs? It is the ripple of the lake of Genesareth, the Spirit breathing upon the waters of baptism. Look without the church - there is the restless old ocean thundering with all his waves, you can hear the roar from here. Look within. All is calm: there plays over the baptismal pool only the Dove who fans it into ripples with his healing wings."

The voice of Baring-Gould is more apparent than the voice of Hawker in that second quotation, and it also provides the only evidence that I have been able to find of the two men having actually met. They corresponded two years before Hawker's death about St. Morwenna when Baring-Gould was still at East Mersea and was researching his Lives of the Saints. But Hawker's widow, in the course of her vigorous protest about the first edition of 'The Vicar of Morwenstow', described its author as 'one whose personal knowledge of Mr Hawker was scarcely that of a mere acquaintance.'

Hawker died in August 1875, and 'The Vicar of Morwenstow' was published less than a year later. It is perhaps Baring-Gould's most significant book, for two reasons, one short-term and the other long-term. It caused immediate anger among Hawker's friends, grief to his widow and family, and widespread controversy, as apart from being in Pauline Hawker's words 'full of misstatements', it publicised Hawker's taste for opium and (patently a far greater sin at the time) his deathbed conversion to Roman Catholicism. In the long term, it has run in to many editions and probably remains, despite Piers Brendon's admirable biography published in 1975, the most popular book about Hawker. Indeed, without it he might have been forgotten.

How very regrettable therefore that it is unworthy of both its author and its subject. Of course it is a very good entertaining read: 'a gossipy book', as Baring-Gould calls it. In his eagerness to amuse, he swamps the reader with stories of Hawker of varying degrees of veracity, the overall effect being to portray him as a raffish joke-figure. Just one example, from many: Baring-Gould describes the circumstances of Hawker's first marriage.

'...when he retired to Stratton for his long vacation in 1824, his father told him that it was impossible for him to send him back to the university. But Robert Hawker had made up his mind that finish his career at College he would. He had recourse to the following expedient.

There lived at Whitstone, near Holsworthy, four Miss I'ans, daughters of Colonel I'ans. They had been left with an annuity of £200 apiece, as well as lands and a handsome place. At the time when Mr Jacob Hawker announced to his son that a return to Oxford was impossible, the four ladies were at Efford, near Bude, a farm and house leased from Sir Thomas Acland. Directly that Robert Hawker learnt his father's decision, without waiting to put on his hat, he ran from Stratton to Bude, arrived hot and blown at Efford, and proposed to Miss Charlotte I'ans to become his wife. The lady was then aged forty-one, one year older than his mother; she was his godmother, and had taught him his

letters. Miss Charlotte l'ans accepted him, and they were married in November, when he was twenty.' So far as one can check on the details, they tend towards inaccuracy. She was not his godmother, they had not met until he was 8; and they were married in 1823, not 1824. Hawker was indeed twenty, but on page 1 line 2 of the book his biographer was a year out with his date of birth (actually 1803). It is worth adding that the marriage was a very happy one, right through to Charlotte's death in 1863. But what caused the real upset was that word 'expedient'. Not too nice even now, in these morally relaxed times, but then ... It drew this blast from the 'Athenaeum' in a review of the book dated March 25th 1876:

'We read all this with utter amazement; not so much because there is scarcely a word of truth in the details, but because it is beyond our comprehension how, having written so far, i.e. nine pages out of three hundred, Mr Gould could fancy it was right to go on with his memoir. "He had recourse to the following expedient"; in other words, the biographer had no scruple in convicting a man, who is the subject of his memoir, as guilty of an act mean, degrading, and disgraceful.'

That review was the beginning of plenty of trouble for Baring-Gould. It was written by a friend of Hawker's, William Maskell, himself a Roman Catholic convert, previously examining chaplain to Bishop Phillpotts of Exeter. He writes later 'We have no ill feeling towards Mr Gould', but one does begin to wonder as he thunders on. He focuses on a story that Baring-Gould tells, of a Morwenstow farmer and his two sons 'whom we will call Henry and Richard Andrews'. Hawker took on Henry's education and arranged for him to go to Oxford. The young man happened to find a manuscript poem by Hawker, copied it out and used it at least in part as an entry for the Newdigate Poetry Prize, which he duly won. Meanwhile Hawker helped Richard to rent a farm, then when the lease ran out tried, unsuccessfully, to have it renewed. This caused father and son to turn against him, and Hawker reacted with some vigour when they publicly opposed his wishes at a vestry meeting:

He rose to his feet, his eyes flashing and extending his right hand, exclaimed with a voice of thunder, "Richard Andrews, with this hand I made you, and now you are the first to lift up your heel against me. I appeal to God against you." And walking to his chancel, he flung himself on his knees before the altar.'

That, as one can easily imagine, did the Andrews family no good. Richard was dead within a week, and his father ten days later. But what really aroused Maskell's indignation was the theft of the poem for the Newdigate Prize, and in the 'Athenaeum' of 8th April 1876 he claimed to have evidence that 'Richard Andrews' had written the whole poem himself. Hawker, who could tell at least as good a story as his biographer, and who had undoubtedly quarrelled with the family, may well have been responsible for the alternative version of the truth.

Meanwhile, Baring-Gould provided the 'Athenaeum' with a very different version of The Andrews story, published perhaps appropriately in the issue of April 1st 1886:

'The persons of whom he (Hawker) told the story, instead of having been so greatly indebted to him, had, on the other hand, done him many favours. They did not die, as he represented, after having been denounced by him, nor at the time he pretends. But this is not all. The worst of the story has yet to be told, as I have just learnt it. The author of the prize poem lent Mr Hawker money and, on one occasion, saved the living from sequestration. Afterwards, in a manner which I cannot bear to relate, he repudiated the debt, and when the fact became known in the neighbourhood, concocted the monstrous story of the prize poem being mainly his own composition to justify (!) his conduct. I need hardly say that, knowing now the facts, names and dates, I shall at once expunge the story from my Memoir. I much regret that I gave it credence'

Well, yes. Maskell comments, 'If Mr Baring Gould can prove the truth of his new account of the transaction, we would suggest that he should suppress, not merely a single page, but the whole

of his Memoir. Who would care to read about a man who could be guilty of such baseness?'

Mrs Hawker, the widow, now joined in the fray. She was Hawker's second wife, Pauline, whom he had married in 1864: forty years younger than he, Charlotte had been 21 years older, and the two marriages appear to have been equally happy. Pauline was understandably bruised, first by the fact that Baring-Gould had published his book 'without the least reference to myself, or the slightest regard to any feeling or wish that I might have, or how much additional sorrow it might cause me'; secondly because 'my knowledge of my husband's character alone enables me to utterly deny that he would ever repudiate a debt, and then concoct a monstrous story to justify his conduct'. Such intense unpleasantness was brought to a temporary halt by Baring-Gould's announcement that 'my Memoir is undergoing revision, and till this revision is made, its circulation is stopped'.

Before we look at the 'New and Revised Edition of June 1876, another strand of the story needs to be briefly taken up: Hawker's conversion on his deathbed to Roman Catholicism, which caused such a stir at the time. The original review of 25th March had quoted evidence that Hawker had been 'a Roman Catholic at heart' for many years before his death. Baring-Gould wrote on 1st April, 'Had I seen the letters quoted in the 'Athenaeum', I would never have written my Memoir'. So he provided himself with one reason for not persevering with its further publication: the apparent ambivalence of his subject's commitment to the Established Church. Maskell had offered two more, the alleged repudiation of a debt, and the tale of the 'expedient'.

However, persevere he did. The new edition contained by my count sixteen changes of any significance, none of them fundamental. I will comment on just some of them. The first two, early in the book, comprise 'so runs the tale' and 'if indeed we may trust the story'. attached to unlikely anecdotes, but he appears soon to have tired of that. Later, he omits Hawker's account of his taking a shipwrecked man to stay in his own house, accusing him of 'poetic licence with the facts', which is pretty rich. He does indeed omit any reference to the Andrews family, substituting a relatively gentle tale of Hawker's destruction with an axe of a family pew in the church before its owner's eyes. A small insertion, just three words, embroiders the statement that after his second marriage he gave up opium: 'He for a time gave up Opium-eating'. He omits an instruction from Hawker to 'his faithful friend and churchwarden' that he was to be buried in Morwenstow church beside his first wife, the friend having announced that 'there is no truth whatever in this statement'. In his account of Hawker's second marriage, he omits a tangential account of Poland's commitment to Roman Catholicism, which had presumably been designed to have bearing on his widow's alleged responsibility for the deathbed conversion. He replaces it with a tasteless tale in the context, about a Bodmin Moor farmer who salted down the body of his first wife in the winter with a view to burying her when the snow had gone, and meanwhile married again. He concludes, "So you see", Mr Hawker would say, when telling the story, "in Cornwall we do things differently from elsewhere. It is on record that the second wife is wed before the first wife is buried." One is left wondering, first, whose story it actually was, and secondly, what Pauline Hawker had done to deserve such treatment: set up the deathbed conversion presumably. He did in fact leave intact from the first edition the moving sentiment, 'Not one ungenerous or unkind word would I say to wound a widow's sacred feelings'.

I am afraid that no one emerges well from this remarkable . story: least of all the man whom the SBGAS exists to commemorate. May I suggest however that it has its derivation from two sources, first the concern about Hawker's conversion to Rome which seems so disproportionate a hundred and twenty years later, and secondly, his biographer's love of a good story, with perhaps scant regard for the truth of it. This, as I have already hinted, was something he shared with Hawker.

At the beginning of this article I implied that the two men scarcely knew one another. Baring-Gould does however quote a letter which he received in 1874 from London, during one of Robert and

Pauline Hawker's rare absences from Morwenstow. After discussing how he might be helped to raise funds for his church, Hawker concludes:

`At all events do write. I seem nearer to you here than at home. If you come up, do find us out. I write in haste. Yours faithfully, R.S.Hawker.

He was not the only one to write in haste. But let me end on a warmer note. What a pity that Baring-Gould never did 'find us out'. They would surely have got on very well, and most important, they would have come to know one another better.

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SBGAS Newsletter 1995/96, No. 21, p. 11