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PROFILE IN FAITH Shaftesbury: The Great Reformer

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The first of two articles dealing with the life and significance of the British evangelical social reformer, the seventh earl of Shaftesbury

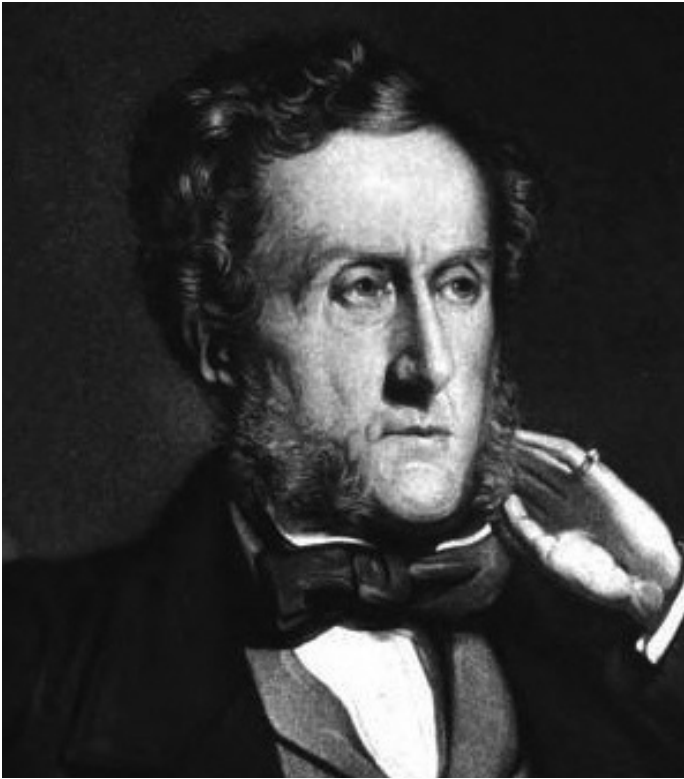
A year after the veteran antislavery campaigner William Wilberforce left Parliament in 1825, the future leader of evangelicalism in England entered the House of Commons.¹ Anthony Ashley Cooper, known as Lord Ashley until his succession as seventh earl of Shaftesbury upon his father's death in 1851, was a very different character from Wilberforce.² Although less well known, he is, potentially, of greater importance. In two articles we will examine his life and significance.

Shaftesbury's evangelical Christian vision of society was remarkable. He understood the role of government but also that it was limited. He believed in both the conversion of the soul and the transformation of society. This was primarily to be achieved by the actions of Christians working together in voluntary societies. He was driven by a combined sense of deep call from God and English aristocratic paternalism. He often felt the world to be against him and suffered from introspection that bordered on the depressive. Indeed, Florence Nightingale once commented that had the earl of Shaftesbury not been committed to the reform of the asylum he would have been in one.³ Yet this same man was offered a cabinet office by both political parties of the day, three times in 1866 alone, and he declined on each occasion (though not without some anguish). Thousands of people lined the streets of London for his funeral. He was associated with hundreds of Christian voluntary societies. His motivations were profoundly theological. With an acute sense of the duties implied by a belief in the Second Advent of Christ, Shaftesbury successfully negotiated his way through the minefield of eschatology to produce a rounded, dynamic, and biblical understanding of Christian responsibility in society. His vision is one we would do well to recover.

This first article will set the scene and look at his early years, the campaigns for the mentally ill, the conditions of children in factories and mines, and the role of Christian voluntary societies. In the second article we will consider his theological motivations, his sometimes controversial ecclesiastical campaigns, the struggle for the "climbing boys," and his place in history.

Upbringing, Conversion, and Call

Anthony Ashley Cooper was born on April 28, 1801. The family comprised English aristocrats with landed estates, which he would in due course inherit. The family's politics were Tory.⁴ Ashley's childhood was less than congenial. His parents displayed little affection toward him, and he regarded his mother as guilty of dereliction of duty and harshness. The key influence in his early years was the family housekeeper, Maria Millis. She not only showed him the love that his parents lacked toward him, but also, as a committed Christian, she introduced the young aristocrat to evangelical devotion. The effect was to be long lasting. Maria prayed with Ashley and read him the Bible. Shaftesbury later recalled that Maria provided him with his first memories of prayer and piety.⁵ Ashley



Lord Shaftesbury 1886

hated school but eventually emerged with a first-class honors degree in Classics from Oxford.

There was nothing particularly unusual about the early life of the young aristocrat. His father had become the sixth earl of Shaftesbury in 1811, and the natural course for Ashley would be to enter politics. Ashley was duly elected the Tory member of Parliament for Woodstock, near Oxford, in the general election of 1826, a contest notorious as the “no popery” election. The issue at large was that of increasing civil liberties for dissenters⁶ and for Roman Catholics. Ashley was emerging as a rather fervent “high Tory.”⁷

In October 1825, Ashley, looking to the forthcoming election, wrote in his diary, “I have a great mind to found a policy upon the Bible.”⁸ The question was how to distinguish the stirrings of faith from the classic position of Tory Protestantism. There are clear signs in this period that Ashley was going beyond the traditional positions of a Tory aristocrat.

With the death of John Wesley in 1791, evangelicalism in England was moving into a second generation of leaders both within and outside of the Church of England. In 1797 Wilberforce published his devastating comparison of “real Christianity” and “nominal Christianity.” His book

A Practical View sold more than seventy-five thousand copies in fifteen editions up to 1837.⁹ Wilberforce and his “Clapham Sect”¹⁰ were closely involved in the foundation of early societies such as the Church Missionary Society (1799) and the British and Foreign Bible Society (1804) and a newspaper, the *Christian Observer* (1802).

However, in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, evangelicalism underwent some changes in emphasis that formed an important backdrop to Shaftesbury’s emergence. First, evangelicals came to place increased stress on the supernatural intervention of God. Hence eschatology, the theology of the end times, became more prominent in evangelical thought. This had significant impact upon Shaftesbury and his combined efforts in evangelism and social concern. The second development was a hardening of the Protestant Reformed heritage of evangelicalism. The two were linked. When Christ returned, he would expect to find purity in his church. The beast and the whore of Babylon in the book of Revelation came again to be explicitly linked with the papacy. In 1828 a hard-line newspaper was founded, *The Record*. An increasingly large number of Protestant evangelical members of Parliament began to gather around the paper and were known as Recordites.

This was the context of Lord Ashley’s conversion and call to public life. Ashley refers to his reading Philip Doddridge, a noted nonconformist writer of the previous century, seeing it as “one of the first things that opened my eyes,” and also to evangelical Thomas Scott’s renowned *Commentary on the Bible* and noting the contrast between its views and “those to which I had been accustomed. I began to think for myself.”¹¹ In addition he was beginning to see the hand of God intervening in natural events, including the financial crash of 1825–26 and the unexpected death of Prime Minister Canning in 1827. By 1829 he was being referred to as a “saint.” Although this was a term of abuse rather than endearment aimed at evangelicals by their critics and Ashley disavowed the appellation, it illustrates that he was now displaying sufficient evangelical characteristics for others to call him such.

Ashley was also now occupying a minor office in government. All of this came together in the clear call of God on Lord Ashley’s life, an essential prerequisite to a life of Christian service. In 1827 he had written in his diary: “I desire to be useful in my generation, and die in the knowledge of having advanced happiness by having advanced true religion.”¹² He had earlier declared, “I want nothing but usefulness to God and my country.”¹³ His mood oscillated between his self-deprecation at his lack of fitness for service and his increasing sense of call.

Every one chooses his career and it is well if he chooses that which is best suited to his talents. I have taken political life because I have, by God's blessing, many advantages of birth and situation which, although of trifling value if unsupported, are yet very powerful aids if joined to zeal and honesty. It is here, therefore, that I have the chief way of being useful to my generation.¹⁴

In 1830 he married, Minny Cowper, a very happy marriage considering the dysfunctional nature of both families concerned. Minny's mother was the long-term mistress of Viscount Palmerston, whom she eventually married in 1839. So a future Whig prime minister became step-father-in-law to the ardent evangelical Tory reformer. This was to be significant in later years. In fact Palmerston may have been Minny's father.

The Early Campaigns

Ashley's first campaign was somewhat unusual but influenced the whole of his life. The lunatic asylums of Victorian England were dark and dismal places where the inconvenient could be forgotten. Ashley's first parliamentary speech was concerned with the protection of the mentally ill. Unfortunately he mumbled his speech to such an extent that not even the parliamentary recorder could hear what he said. He often reflected in his diaries on society's treatment of the mentally ill. He was appointed a metropolitan commissioner of lunacy in 1828, becoming chairman in 1834 and served on it and its successor body until his death in 1885. His role was primarily to visit the asylums for random inspections, and he carried out his duties with great diligence.

More well known among the early campaigns are those concerned with the welfare of children in factories and mines. The poet Robert Southey referred to "the white slave trade."¹⁵ This campaign was already in the hands of the evangelicals in Parliament before Ashley took it on. He did so after the defeat of the evangelical Tory MP Michael Sadler in the 1832 general election. Ashley was approached by another evangelical MP, Sir Andrew Agnew, whom he knew from the parliamentary committee to protect the Sabbath. For over ten years, Ashley battled to ensure that children were given proper protection. Ashley moved first of all to prevent the employment of children under the age of nine years and then restrict the hours of employment to those younger than eighteen years to ten hours per day and eight on a Saturday. The government sought to delay proceedings by establishing a commission (by 74 votes to 73).

The first piece of legislation to emerge, the Factory Act of 1833, was a compromise. Various aspects of the Act were not operative until 1836. In the intervening time, the government fell from office and the new prime minister, Lord Melbourne, attempted to ease some of the restrictions. Ashley was furious. He poured scorn on the government's claims and pressed the charge of hypocrisy. It was a powerful performance by Ashley, still only thirty-five years old. The government survived the ordeal by just two votes and then gracefully withdrew its proposals. Ashley's guerrilla tactics continued. In 1840 Ashley secured a commission into the operation of the earlier legislation. Ashley was appointed chairman, and this comprehensive report is a testament to his untiring commitment. In this same period, he was already actively involved in campaigning for the protection of the "climbing boys" (we will consider this in the second article) and the employment of children in mines. This latter form of exploitation was particularly harrowing. Children as young as five years old were employed in mines to push the trucks along roadways often only twenty-four inches high and attached to chains, to ventilate the mine shaft, and in various other



Lord Shaftesbury and a group of Manchester boys - 1883

tasks. Mines were dangerous places. Poisonous gases, high temperatures, cramped conditions—all contributed to what, in this instance, amounted to a public outcry. Males and females worked together, often scantily clad, and there was moral outrage also at the inevitable consequences. In an unusually receptive House of Commons, Ashley moved a bill that, after a struggle, passed into law in 1842, prohibiting, among other things, all female employment in mines and the employment of boys under the age of ten. The battle over factories continued for another five years until the ten-hours principle was finally secured in 1847.

How did Ashley view these early campaigns? Although they had long been led by the Protestant evangelical Tories, it led to some strange bedfellows. On one occasion Ashley shared a platform with the trade unionist Robert Owen. To Ashley, socialism and trade unionism were anathema. Part of the explanation lies in the utopian Tory vision of rural England in which different classes of society all knew their place but the landowners cared for those who worked on their land. This utopia, if it ever existed, was swept away by the Industrial Revolution, but it remained a motivating factor for the high Tories. The other key factor was Ashley's Christian faith. The combination of an acute sense of human sin alongside an understanding of Protestant constitutionalism became a powerful driver. Ashley regularly visited the mining and industrial districts to gain firsthand evidence. In 1838 he claimed the country would face the judgment of God for the less-favourable treatment of its own children compared to recently freed slaves in the West Indian plantations. The situation in the mines he referred to as "a mass of sin and cruelty."¹⁶ He commented in Parliament:

*some of the evils of so hideous a nature, that they will not admit of delay—they must be instantly removed—evils that are both disgusting and intolerable—disgusting they would be in a heathen country, and perfectly intolerable they are in one that professes to call itself Christian.*¹⁷

This speech lasted two hours. He asked God to keep him humble, saying, "without thee I am nothing worth, and that from Thee alone cometh all counsel, wisdom, and understanding for the sake of our most dear and only Saviour, God manifest in the flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ."¹⁸ In 1842 Ashley linked this understanding of sin and Protestant constitutionalism to a wider eschatology. He noted in his diary, "our prayer must be for the Second Advent, our toil, 'that we be found watching.'"¹⁹

To that key motivation we must return.

The Voluntary Societies

If we left our investigations at this point, we would have a picture of a dynamic Christian social campaigner who secured many important and necessary protections for young people. However, we would also be left with an incomplete portrait and many questions unanswered. Shaftesbury believed that it was entirely appropriate for government to legislate for the protection of the vulnerable. However, he also viewed the role of government as extremely limited and potentially damaging to the wider Christian and social cause. This was the reason why the Christian voluntary society came to play such a significant role in his thinking and why he lamented, particularly around 1870, government taking over functions previously undertaken by such Christian societies.

Shaftesbury was committed to the voluntary principle in both evangelism and social concern. He was the chairman of the meeting that founded one of England's premier home mission agencies in 1836, the Church Pastoral Aid Society. He worked across denominational boundaries in the London City Mission, founded in 1835. He was instrumental in the establishment of the Ragged School Union in 1844, a rather quaint Victorian title representing the union of voluntary Christian schools serving the poor. He was closely associated with the Church Missionary Society, the Bible Society, the London Society for the Promotion of Christianity Amongst the Jews, and numerous local societies. In essence his view was that both evangelism and social reform were best executed by Christians working together on the ground across the usual boundaries of denominational divisions. This is what he told the annual meeting of the London City Mission in 1863:

*put all that aside, and let all establishments and all distinctive churches sink into the ground, compared with the one great effort to preach the doctrine of Christ crucified to every creature on the earth, to every creature that can be reached on this habitable globe.*²⁰

A quite remarkable statement for the times.

Shaftesbury worked closely with the City Mission and the Ragged School Union to achieve his objectives. He walked the streets of London with the City Missionaries, gathering evidence for his parliamentary campaigns, encouraging the Christian workers and preaching the gospel. The City Mission had been founded on the principle of taking the gospel to the urban poor of London, primarily through home visitation. The work grew into reaching out to particular employment groups (e.g., flower girls and cab drivers) and many missionaries were involved in founding schools. Although there were some tensions between the evangelistic and social outreach, to Shaftesbury the objectives were all of a piece. The City Missionaries met poverty on a daily basis, and Shaftesbury used this evidence in his wider campaigns. The City Missionaries were often the only people who could penetrate a London slum containing perhaps twenty thousand people living in cramped, damp, and dangerous conditions. On one memorable occasion in 1848, a City Missionary, Thomas Jackson, called Ashley in to address a meeting of 394 convicted felons. In fact, three meetings were held in the depths of a slum district. The sight of an English aristocrat preaching the gospel of salvation to such a group must have seemed incongruous. Ashley not only preached but launched a scheme (perhaps a rather ill-fated attempt) of emigration to help these individuals start

a new life. Ashley described these missionaries as his fellow-workers and laborers. He noted that in all his investigations, they were his first recourse “because we knew that their inquiry would be zealous and immediate, and their report ample and trustworthy.”²¹

Shaftesbury viewed his work with voluntary Christian schools with especial care and favor. They became places where education was shaped by the Bible. Food, even lodging, was often provided for those in need, but faith and education were not seen as separate. He believed the movement to be for nothing less than the glory of God. All the more reason why Shaftesbury was aghast at the proposed governmental intervention in 1870 with legislation for compulsory state education. Quoting his diary entry on the matter at length illustrates both the passion, but also allows us, in our next article, to move to a discussion of the underlying theological motivations that uniquely combined governmental legislation with the primacy of the Christian voluntary society.

*The godless, non-Bible system is at hand; and the Ragged Schools, with all their divine polity, with all their burning and fruitful love for the poor, with all their prayers and harvests for the temporal and eternal welfare of the forsaken, heathenish, destitute, sorrowful, and yet innocent children, must perish under this all-conquering march of intellectual power. Our nature is nothing, the heart is nothing, in the estimation of these zealots of secular knowledge. Everything for the flesh, and nothing for the soul; everything for time, and nothing for eternity.*²²



Portrait of Lord Shaftesbury painted by Anthony Ashley Cooper.

Notes:

1. The British Parliament in 1825 consisted of a lower house, the House of Commons, elected on a limited franchise, and an upper house, the House of Lords, consisting of the holders of aristocratic seats and titles.
2. The title Lord Ashley will be used for reference to the period prior to 1851, Shaftesbury for the post-1851 years. Shaftesbury will also be used for generic description and assessment.
3. Richard Turnbull, *Shaftesbury: The Great Reformer* (London: Lion Hudson, 2010), 10.
4. The two main political parties in this era were the Tories and the Whigs, though there was a sizable independent constituency and much fluidity at the edges. In essence, the Tories represented the traditional landed interest, and the Whigs the more reform-minded merchant classes.
5. Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, 16.
6. *Dissenters* was the term used for religious independents who “dissented” from the established Church of England. They were also sometimes described as nonconformists.
7. A “high Tory” was one who gave special weight to the responsibilities as well as the privileges of the landed interest, not least toward the less fortunate. It was often combined with a position known as Protestant constitutionalism or national Protestantism, a view of the centrality and importance of the Protestant constitution to the British nation.
8. Lord Ashley, Diaries, October 13, 1825, cited in Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, 21.
9. The full title was *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in This Country Contrasted with Real Christianity*.
10. The rather inappropriate title was coined by later critics; it referred to the group of mainly lay Christian business leaders and politicians who gathered around Wilberforce in Clapham, then a village some three miles from London.
11. Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, 35–36.
12. Lord Ashley, Diaries, April 22, 1827; cited in Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, 24.
13. Lord Ashley, Diaries, February 22, 1827; cited in Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, 24.
14. Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, 28.
15. *Ibid.*, 76.
16. *Ibid.*, 87.
17. Lord Ashley in the House of Commons, June 7, 1842; cited in Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, 88.
18. Lord Ashley, Diaries, June 9, 1842; cited in Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, 89.
19. Lord Ashley, Diaries, August 8, 1842; cited in Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, 90.
20. Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, 216.
21. *Ibid.*, 139.
22. Shaftesbury, Diaries, March 16, 1870; see Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, 151.

We are not here to play, to dream, to drift; We have hard work to do and loads
to lift; Shun not the struggle-face it, 'tis God's gift.

Lord Shaftesbury



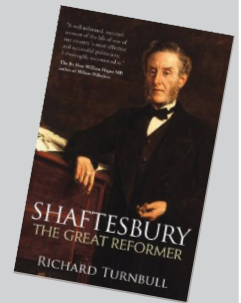
Rev. Dr. Richard Turnbull is a member of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Oxford. He published *Shaftesbury, the Great Reformer*, Lion Hudson, Oxford, 2010.

RECOMMENDED READING

Richard Turnbull, *Shaftesbury, The Great Reformer*, Lion Hudson, London 2010

Shining new light on one of Britain's most celebrated figures, this new biography insightfully explores the beliefs underlying Shaftesbury's passion for the poor

Drawing extensively from Lord Shaftesbury's private journals, this accessible biography shows not just the story of his life—from his happy marriage and many children to his acts of Parliament—but also how his faith led and equipped him to fight for justice in society. Lord Shaftesbury was one of the best loved politicians and social reformers of nineteenth century England. His deep compassion for the poor was legendary, as were his tireless campaigns to limit factory hours, stop the use of boys as chimney sweeps and children in coalmines, and to develop universal education. As a result he changed the character of English society forever. Revealing a moving portrait of a sensitive thinker, areas covered in this important biography include his upbringing and education; his work as a politician and his campaign for mental health; his contribution towards the founding of the Bible Society; his role as a defender of the Protestant faith; his personal theology; and much more.



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