*Jnl of Ecclesiastical History, Vol. 69, No. 1, January 2018.* © Cambridge University Press 2017 86
doi:10.1017/S0022046917000744

# *Joseph Milner and his Editors: Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Evangelicals and the Christian Past*

by PAUL GUTACKER
Baylor University
*E-mail: Paul_Gutacker@baylor.edu*

*Joseph Milner's 'History of the Church of Christ' (1794–1809) was the most popular English-language church history for half a century, yet it remains misunderstood by many historians. This paper argues that Milner's Evangelical interpretation of church history subverted Protestant historiographical norms. By prioritising conversion over doctrinal precision, and celebrating the piety of select medieval Catholics, Milner undermined the historical narratives that undergirded Protestant exceptionalism. As national religious identities became increasingly contested in the 1820s and 1830s, this subversive edge was blunted by publishers who edited the 'History' to be less favourable toward pre-Reformation Christianity.*

Joseph Milner (1744–97), grammar school headmaster and lecturer at Holy Trinity Church, Hull, determined in the 1780s to write a new account of the Church's history.[1] More than 450 subscribers lent their support to Milner's stated aim to produce 'An Ecclesiastical History on a new Plan'. The plan was to rescue the Church's past from what Milner saw as an increasingly cynical Protestant historiography, with its low view of medieval Christianity and eager 'displays of *Ecclesiastical*

I would like to thank Bruce Hindmarsh and Don Lewis for their supervision of this project, as well as Sarah C. Williams, Craig Gay and Hans Boersma for their insight and instruction. Darren Schmidt generously shared his dissertation at a key stage in my research. Early versions of this article were presented at the American Society of Church History and the Baylor History colloquium, and both audiences offered helpful comments. I am especially grateful to Joe Stubenrauch, Elise Leal, Tim Grundmeier, Elizabeth Travers and David Bebbington for the careful and invaluable feedback that they offered on drafts of this article, to Beth Allison Barr and Thomas Kidd for their advice, and to Ryan Butler, Lynneth Miller and Paige Gutacker for their encouragement.

[1] For Milner's life see Arthur Pollard, 'Milner, Joseph', in Donald Lewis (ed.), *The Blackwell dictionary of Evangelical biography, 1730–1860*, Oxford 1995, 776.

*wickedness*'. Histories that dwelt on schism, heresy and corruption, Milner argued, were as like a true account of the Church as 'an history of the highwaymen that have infected this country [were] an history of England'. Instead, Milner's account would focus on authentic Christianity in every age of the Church, celebrating those 'men who have been *real*, not merely *nominal* Christians'.[2]

The four volumes that resulted would remain the leading Evangelical church history for half a century.[3] Milner's *History of the Church of Christ* was translated into six languages, published over thirty times in Britain and ten times in the United States, and, according to one critic, as late as 1847 remained the primary source of church history for Anglicans.[4] Yet, for all Milner's popularity, scholarly accounts of the development of church history treat his *History* as insignificant, an out-of-place relic in the progression from early modern 'confessional' to nineteenth-century 'critical' historical methods. While several studies, most notably John Walsh's 1959 article in this JOURNAL, as well as Darren Schmidt's 2009 doctoral dissertation, appreciate Milner's creative account of medieval Christianity, on the whole his *History* is treated as a pious, unscholarly apologetic.[5] But Milner's *History* merits reconsideration not only for its largely unnoticed departures from the conventions of Protestant ecclesiastical historiography, but also for what it reveals about the interplay between Evangelical and national identities in the early nineteenth century. The publication, reception and revisions of Milner's *History* illuminate a tension between earlier Evangelical concern with nominal, or 'rational' Protestantism, and the growing emphasis, both in Britain and in the United States, on defining both genuine religion and the nation itself as Protestant. Put another way, Milner shows that popular accounts of church history were implicated in the question of Protestant nationalism.

[2] Joseph Milner, *The history of the Church of Christ*, York 1794, i, pp. ix–xi.

[3] See John Walsh, 'Joseph Milner's Evangelical church history', this JOURNAL x (1959), 174–87.

[4] See Julius Charles Hare, *The means of unity*, London 1847, 47.

[5] Milner goes unmentioned in Euan Cameron's survey of church histories: *Interpreting Christian history: the challenge of the Churches' past*, Oxford 2005, 152. James Bradley misplaces Milner chronologically, arguing that he was surpassed by Mosheim when in fact Milner critiqued and revised the Lutheran historian, not the other way around: *Church history: an introduction to research, reference works, and methods*, Grand Rapids 1995, 13–14. Walsh, in contrast, recognises Milner's achievements in 'Joseph Milner's Evangelical church history'. See also the excellent study by Darren Schmidt, who reads Milner's *History* as belonging to an Evangelical historiography characterised by revival and decline: 'Reviving the past: eighteenth-century Evangelical interpretations of church history', unpubl. PhD diss. St Andrews 2009, 30–1, 95.

## Milner's *History of the Church of Christ*

In Milner's first volume, published in 1794, he declared that he was producing the first proper Protestant church history. Protestant historians, most notably Johann Lorenz von Mosheim (1693–1755), devoted pages to religious controversies, civil matters and heresies, Milner complained, while offering 'very scanty information of the progress of true religion'.[6] The famed martyrologist John Foxe (1516–87) was too anti-Catholic for Milner's tastes, and, although Milner appreciated the voluminous efforts of Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520–75), he found the *Magdeburg Centuriators* tedious and at times unfair to the Catholic past.[7] While Milner did not mention Gottfried Arnold (1666–1714), his narrative implicitly challenged the Pietist historian's celebration of medieval heretics; more recent portrayals of the early and medieval Church by Edward Gibbon (1737–94) and David Hume (1711–76) were, in Milner's eyes, similarly tainted by deep prejudice against orthodox Christianity.[8] Between these Protestants and sceptics, who cynically disparaged medieval Christianity, and Catholic apologists, who blindly defended it, Milner presented himself as balanced and objective, reminding readers that when it came to history, 'indiscriminate incredulity is as blind a thing as indiscriminate belief'.[9] In positioning himself as a moderate between modern scepticism and Catholic credulity, Milner revealed his Enlightenment sensibilities.[10]

Rather than following other Protestant historians in excoriating the corruptions and superstitions of medieval Christianity, Milner focused his account on the enduring presence of true Christians, those converted by the Holy Spirit. Milner was optimistic that he could discern who had experienced conversion: as 'real' Christians throughout the centuries shared a 'uniformity of faith, of inward experience, and of external practice'.[11] Milner's conversionist telling of church history required a particular kind of reading, wherein 'the Scriptural Reader' must 'divest himself of all partial regards for sects and denominations, ages and countries'.[12] By attending solely to the fruits of conversion, the Evangelical reader would be convinced of the persistence of genuine Christianity throughout time, and realise that he too belonged to this 'succession of pious men in all ages'.[13] Milner invited his readers to locate themselves in a lineage that

[6] Milner, *History*, i, pp. ix–x, 529.

[7] While Milner appreciated Foxe's piety, he also criticised him: ibid. i, pp. xiin.; iii. 341. For Flacius see Milner's rebuttal on Boniface (675–754): iii. 200–1.

[8] See idem, *Gibbon's account of Christianity considered: together with some strictures on Hume's dialogues concerning natural religion*, York 1781.

[9] Idem, *History*, i. 503.

[10] As David Bebbington has argued, Evangelicals most clearly reflected Enlightenment ideals in their self-perception as moderates: *Evangelicalism in modern Britain: a history from the 1730s to the 1980s*, London 1989, 50–4.

[11] Milner, *History*, iii. 503.

[12] Ibid. iii, p. iii.

[13] Ibid. i, p. xiii.

stretched from the apostolic era through the Middle Ages and to the Protestant Reformation.

One of Milner's key revisions was his insistence that Protestant historians ought not 'be prejudiced against the real church, because she then wore a Roman garb'.[14] Milner set out to recover as many believers in 'Roman garb' as could be found, and, over the course of his first three volumes, was surprisingly successful.[15] He included hundreds of monks, bishops and priests, even praising the faith of popes Eugenius III (1080–1153) and Celestine V (1215–96).[16] He defended at length many medieval clerics and theologians, including Gregory the Great (540–604), Boniface (675–754), Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) and Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who had been unfairly treated, he thought, by Flacius and Mosheim. Even while acknowledging that these men supported the papacy, Milner represented them as genuine believers, repristinated long quotations from their writings, and encouraged readers to imitate their piety.[17] At the same time, Milner was much less willing than either Mosheim or Arnold to celebrate medieval 'proto-Protestants' who were persecuted by the papacy.[18]

Milner's defence of select medieval Catholics has been overlooked by scholars who portray him as typically Protestant: A. G. Dickens and John Tonkin asserted that Milner's *History* was representative of Evangelical anti-Catholicism, while S. J. Barnett wrongly concluded that Milner wrote a history of 'proto-Protestants' who had opposed the papacy.[19] To be sure, Milner maintained a typical Protestant understanding that genuine Christianity had declined between Augustine and Luther, agreed with Isaac Newton (1643–1727) that after the papacy of Gregory II (715–31) the Church was inundated with false doctrine, and lamented the increase of 'monastic darkness and superstition' throughout the late medieval era.[20] Both conceptually and rhetorically Milner's *History* reflected a degree of

[14] Ibid. iii, p. iv.

[15] This study will focus on the first three volumes of Milner's *History*, both because his brother Isaac finished the fourth and because the primary interest is Evangelical accounts of pre-Reformation history.

[16] For his treatment of Eugenius see Milner, *History*, iii. 366. For Celestine see iv. 36–7.

[17] For Gregory see ibid. ii. 77. Anselm and Boniface are treated at iii. 332, 200–1. For Bernard see iii. 443. Milner also argued vigorously against Mosheim's criticisms of Cyprian and disparagement of Augustine's theological writings: i. 487–89; ii. 502.

[18] Unlike Mosheim, Milner refused to call the twelfth-century dissenter Arnold of Brescia a true Christian, and mitigated Mosheim's praise for the Beguines and the Paulicians. For Arnold see ibid. iii. 504; for other persecuted sects see iii. 230, 407.

[19] A. G. Dickens and John Tonkin, *The Reformation in historical thought*, Cambridge, MA 1985, 190. See S. J. Barnett, 'Where was your Church before Luther? Claims for the antiquity of Protestantism examined', *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* lxviii (1999), 14–41 at p. 41.

[20] See Milner, *History*, iii. 161, 187; ii. 323.

eighteenth-century anti-Catholicism. However, his willingness to include and celebrate pro-papacy Christians not only disproves the notion that his *History* was limited to 'proto-Protestants' but also shows that his anti-Catholicism was mitigated by the desire to present an edifying account. As Darren Schmidt points out, then, in its inclusivity towards and elevation of medieval believers, the *History* diverged from Protestant tendencies to exclude Catholics from the lineage of true spirituality.[21]

Because of Milner's explicitly Evangelical aims, his irenicism was lost on nineteenth-century critics, who dismissed the *History* as narrow-minded and partisan. The High Churchman H. J. Rose (1795–1838), for example, critiqued Milner's *History* in 1834 as 'obviously a party book [that] therefore *must* do mischief'.[22] Likewise, Julius Charles Hare (1795–1855), who was given to Broad Church sympathies, accused Milner in 1847 of only including those who shared his Evangelical understanding of justification, confirming for the Calvinist party 'that there never was a true Christian upon earth, except such as have made use of their shibboleth'.[23] These nineteenth-century criticisms continue to characterise the literature: Yngve Brilioth, Arthur Pollard and John Walsh each asserted that Milner only included those who agreed with his particular understanding of justification by faith alone.[24] By these lights, Milner perpetuated the tradition of Protestant confessional historiography, but with an Evangelical gloss.

These criticisms fail to attend to the full scope of Milner's inclusiveness. While Milner held justification by faith to be essential, he prioritised evidence of conversion above doctrinal precision. Even when a historical figure misunderstood justification by faith, the virtues of humility, charity and piety, which Milner repeatedly attributed to true believers, revealed their genuine faith.[25] Origen's (184–253) view of justification, for example, was 'sullied and covered with rubbish' but his conversion was evidenced by 'the piety of his motives and the fervour of his zeal'.[26] Ephraim the Syrian (306–73) had 'defective … views of Evangelical doctrine' and did not understand justification at all, but his faith was to be admired.[27] 'The precise and accurate nature of the doctrine' was not understood

[21] Schmidt concludes that 'Milner's decidedly optimistic coterie of medieval Catholic figures elevated as godly representatives was a striking revision of Protestant historiography': 'Reviving the past', 30–1. For the anti-Catholic nature of Protestant historiography in Milner's day see Barnett, 'Where was your Church', 41.

[22] H. J. Rose, 'The Rev. H. J. Rose, in reply to the Rev. J. Scott, on Milner', *Christian Observer* (1834), 619–21 at p. 621.

[23] Hare, *The means of unity*, 47–8.

[24] See Yngve Brilioth, *The Anglican revival: studies in the Oxford Movement*, London 1925, 35; Walsh, 'Joseph Milner's Evangelical church history', 177; and Pollard, 'Milner, Joseph', 776.

[25] Milner described both Lambert, a seventh-century bishop, and Bernard as characterised by 'humility, piety, and charity': *History*, iii. 157, 449.

[26] Ibid. i. 327.

[27] Ibid. ii. 273–5, 277–8.

even by Augustine of Hippo (354–430), but 'doubtless it savingly flourished in his heart'.[28] Milner praised the 'piety, humility, and charity' of Fulgentius (468–533), even though the North African bishop misunderstood the word 'justify'.[29] Robert Grosseteste (1175–1253) failed to embrace 'the just nature of the Christian article of Justification', but plainly trusted in Christ.[30] Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471) was badly wrong about justification, but 'well versed in Christian experience'.[31] More examples could be given. In his eagerness to prove the endurance of true faith, Milner prioritised evidence of conversion above an articulation of justification by faith, and included many whose doctrine he considered flawed. While Schmidt and Walsh rightly noted Milner's relative charity toward medieval Catholics, his selection was more generous than even they acknowledge.[32]

Perhaps even more surprising was Milner's subversion of Protestant exceptionalism – the notion that the spiritual and social goods of Christianity grew out of Protestant principles, while all that was misguided or false was due to Romanist corruption. Milner not only celebrated the faith of many medieval Catholics, but also insisted that some had been better Christians than the Protestants of his own day.[33] Perhaps eighteenth-century Englishmen had shed superstitious beliefs and rituals, but their overconfidence in reason, their arrogance and their 'mercantile taste' were as absurd as any medieval practice.[34] Against the grain of Protestant historiography, Milner placed the Catholic past in judgement over the Protestant present. He argued, for instance, that the so-called 'dark ages' surpassed Protestant Britain in zeal for missions.[35] In contrast to Mosheim, Gibbon and Hume, Milner admired medieval Britain, insisting that Bede's history evidenced 'a real spirit of godliness' in the land.[36] Milner even pointed out that Britain owed a spiritual debt to the medieval Church, and defended the reputations of Gregory the Great and Anselm, favourite targets of British Protestant historians.[37]

A key function of Milner's portrayal of Catholic figures, then, was to add historical weight to his critique of a nominally Protestant Britain. While 'superstition, to a certain degree, may co exist with the spirit of the Gospel', Milner argued, the rationalism of the *philosophes* was incompatible with godliness.[38] He underscored the point by caricaturing rationalists as Roman Catholics, suggesting that Gibbon, Hume and Voltaire functioned as Protestant popes whose every word was uncritically accepted.[39] Those

[28] Ibid. ii. 504. [29] Ibid. iii. 4, 7, 9. [30] Ibid. iv. 64. [31] Ibid. iv. 272.
[32] See Schmidt, 'Reviving the past', 199; Walsh, 'Joseph Milner's Evangelical church history', 181. [33] For example see Milner, *History*, i. 448; ii. 272–3, 294, 490.
[34] Ibid. ii. 490, 294. [35] Ibid. iii. 295. [36] Ibid. iii. 154.
[37] Ibid. iii. 95, 341. Milner also criticised Mosheim's portrait of Catholic missionaries to Britain: iii. 128. [38] Ibid. iii, p. iv.
[39] Milner first used this device in *Gibbon's account of Christianity*, 238.

who narrated the story of Christian history as inimical to human progress – here, Gibbon was in mind – set up 'the eighteenth century as a pope to judge the foregoing seventeen'.[40]

Likewise, he criticised Mosheim for failing 'to shew any candour toward the ancients' and for assuming 'all excellencies to be confined to these later ages'.[41] Milner claimed that modern sceptics were essentially Romish, while underneath the 'Roman garb' of the medieval saint one might find a real Christian. Ironically, it was the overly critical reader who was in danger of being popish, not the reader who appreciated medieval piety. Milner's account of the pre-Reformation tradition, then, distanced genuine Christian spirituality from Protestant rationality, while at the same time subverting the historical tradition that undergirded Protestant exceptionalism.

## *Milner's reception*

On the whole, Evangelicals received Milner's work enthusiastically. The *Christian Observer* commended Milner's *History* in 1803 for its salubrious effect on the reader, for whom 'faith is invigorated and hope enlivened by the triumph of Evangelical truth over the splendid system of pagan idolatry'.[42] In particular, the reviewer appreciated Milner's assault on the rationalists, praising his refutation of 'the artful and insidious misrepresentations of Hume and Gibbon'.[43] Evangelical readers were delighted to discover that genuine Christians existed in every era: 'My mind was repeatedly arrested', one reviewer wrote in 1812, by the 'lives of many illustrious characters, not only in the earliest but subsequent ages of Christianity'.[44] Milner had set out to edify, and for many readers he succeeded. 'Milner's History … will be read with delight by every Bible Christian', an 1827 article promised, and 'the pious reader will always rise from this book animated and strengthened for "the race set before him"'.[45] Edward Bickersteth (1786–1850) advised his readers in 1829 that Milner's was not only 'the best history', but also 'eminently pious and useful'.[46]

[40] Idem, *History*, i. 275.

[41] Ibid. i. 489.

[42] 'Review of new publications', *Christian Observer* ii/10 (1803), 609. Unless otherwise noted, the reviews cited here are of Milner's original work or the edition corrected by his brother Isaac in 1800, which left intact Joseph's interpretations.

[43] 'Review of new publications (continued)', *Christian Observer* iii/1 (1804), 35.

[44] 'To youth and parents', *Christian Monitor and Religious Intelligencer* i/10 (1812), 159.

[45] 'The common Christian's library', *Washington Theological Repertory* viii/8 (1827), 353.

[46] Edward Bickersteth, *The Christian student, designed to assist Christians in general in acquiring religious knowledge*, London 1829, 518.

Milner's *History* proliferated through a denominationally diverse network of Evangelical publishers, patrons and reviewers, who believed that the same historical line traced by Milner continued through their own evangelistic efforts. Before the first US edition was printed in 1809, Milner had been translated into Dutch and German; Evangelicals printed his account in Swedish, Italian, French and Spanish as well. In 1805 the Moravian Peter Mortimer (1750–1828) reported that his German translation, annually printed for three years, was read throughout 'Switzerland, Prussia, Livonia, Denmark, and Sweden', and as far off as Greenland and Russia.[47] The *History* went onto the mission field with Bishop Reginald Heber (1783–1826), who planned to translate excerpts of Milner into Cingalese.[48] In the United States, colleges and seminaries used Milner as a textbook, while American religious periodicals repristinated his accounts of early Christian martyrs such as Polycarp and Perpetua.[49]

In spite of scholarly criticisms – most notably the articles by S. R. Maitland (1792–1866), which exposed Milner's factual errors and censured his reliance on secondary sources – the *History* enjoyed a remarkably long run of popularity.[50] One High Churchman complained in 1847 that it remained the main 'source from which a large portion of our Church derive their notions of ecclesiastical history'.[51] Evangelical publishers in London, Edinburgh and Philadelphia continued to reprint Milner's *History* every few years through the 1840s and 1850s. As late as 1850 the scholarly review *Bibliotheca Sacra*, while noting the *History*'s weaknesses, still recommended it 'for practical and popular use'.[52] Such longevity illustrates that Milner's *History* encapsulated and propagated Evangelical spirituality. As James Stephen (1789–1859) declared in 1849, it was 'one of those books which may perish with some revolution of the moral and religious character of the English race, but hardly otherwise'.[53]

However, not all Evangelicals were comfortable with Milner's account. Some, including Hannah More (1745–1833), found his theological interpretations tendentious.[54] Evangelicals were most likely to be bothered by

[47] This is quoted in Mary Milner, *The life of Isaac Milner*, London 1844, 334–5.

[48] 'Last days of Bishop Heber', *Philadelphia Recorder* viii/48 (1831), 192.

[49] Milner's *History* was a staple on the library shelves of Yale, Andover and Brown. See *Catalogue of books in the library of Yale-College*, New Haven 1808, 57; *Catalogue of the library belonging to the theological institution in Andover*, Andover 1819, 96; *A catalogue of the library of Brown University*, Andover 1843, 294. For examples of periodicals extracting Milner see *The Weekly Record* (Chillicothe, Ohio), 27 Apr., 24, 31 May 1815, 10 Apr. 1816, and *North Star* (Danville, Vermont), 1 Aug. 1822, 30 Mar., 13, 20 Apr. 1824.

[50] S. R. Maitland, *A letter to the Rev. H. J. Rose with strictures on Milner's church history*, London 1834, 10. Maitland published criticisms of Milner in 1834, 1835 and 1836.

[51] Hare, *The means of unity*, 47.

[52] *Bibliotheca Sacra* vii/25 (1850), 65–6.

[53] James Stephen, *Essays in ecclesiastical biography*, London 1849, ii. 158.

[54] See 'Biographical sketches: V. Rev. Joseph Milner', *Christian Observer* (1877), 317.

the *History*'s implications regarding their own ecclesiastical sympathies. The Anglican Evangelical Thomas Haweis (1734–1820), a leading figure in the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion, disliked Milner's criticism of medieval schismatics, and, in 1800, published a rival history intended to please Evangelicals of all denominations.[55] Dissenters in Britain and Evangelicals in the United States disapproved of Milner's defence of church establishment, and denominational belonging often accurately predicted a reviewer's assessment of the *History*.[56] Especially troublesome to Protestant readers was Milner's inclusion of medieval Catholics. *The Christian Disciple and Theological Review*, an influential Unitarian publication, lambasted Milner for his praise of medieval 'hermits, and monks' and his portrayal of the 'dark ages' as virtuous.[57] Some Evangelicals were also troubled: in his 1843 review, the dissenting minister John Cockin (1783–1861) criticised the history for being too 'tender and indulgent towards … the bishops of Rome'. Readers, he advised, should be skeptical of Milner's overly generous portrait of medieval Christians.[58]

The criticisms levelled by Cockin reflect a growing discomfort among some Evangelicals with Milner's departure from Protestant historiographical norms, particularly the ways in which his celebration of select medieval Catholics undermined Protestant exceptionalism. This is most evident in the ways that Milner's *History* was revised, particularly in the editions printed by the Religious Tract Society (RTS), the American Sunday School Union (ASSU) and the London publisher Robert Seeley. These three adaptations merit attention because they emerged from leading Evangelical publishers, and, in contrast to other nineteenth-century editions, evidence a deliberate revision of Milner's account.

## *The Religious Tract Society's adaptation*

As Roger Martin documents, the printing of Milner's *History* by the RTS in 1826 only took place after a divisive controversy.[59] The RTS was

[55] See Arthur Skevington Wood, *Thomas Haweis, 1734–1820*, London 1957, 221.

[56] See, for example, the article written by an anonymous American student, 'On some uses of ecclesiastical history', *Evangelical and Literary Magazine* vi/3 (1823), 113. Contrast two American publications in 1836: the *Episcopal Recorder* praised Milner's *History* as excellent and instructive, while the Baptist *Christian Review* dismissed it as uncritical and only 'distinguished for its pious strain of feeling': *Episcopal Recorder* xiii/44 (1836), 175; *Christian Review* i/3 (1836), 428.

[57] This review was prompted by the second printing of the 1809 American edition of Milner: *The Christian Disciple and Theological Review* iv (1822), 307–9.

[58] John Cockin, *Reflections after reading*, London 1843, 131, 135.

[59] See Roger H. Martin, *Evangelicals united: ecumenical stirrings in pre-Victorian Britain, 1795–1830*, Metuchen, NJ 1983, 165–6.

determined to avoid theological partisanship in its publications;[60] when George Stokes (1789–1847), a wealthy Anglican layman and RTS trustee, offered to fund a printing of Milner's *History* as part of the society's new initiative to reprint theological works for middle-class readers, many Nonconformist members protested.[61] Milner's defence of the establishment and castigation of dissenting groups bothered some members of the Society, but also troubling was the charity that Milner had shown to medieval Christianity. Milner's *History*, these Evangelicals charged, included 'details which would not be unworthy of the credulity of a Roman Catholic historian', even praising 'canonised saints of the Romish calendar'.[62] After months of debate, the Society decided to print a revision of the *History* without Milner's name and with all offensive portions removed.

In 1826 the RTS published the three-volume revision, edited by Stokes himself. In keeping with his charge to remove Anglican bias, Stokes redacted much of Milner's commentary, his charge that the Donatists and Novatians were dissenters, his extensive defence of ecclesiastical establishment, and his argument that genuine Christianity did not begin to decline upon Constantine's conversion.[63] Milner had defended early monasticism as a well-intended, even pious, enterprise; Stokes removed this entirely.[64] To ensure that middle-class Evangelicals not take offence, Stokes also excised potentially troubling historical details, including Milner's mention that the Donatists practiced re-baptism, and his inclusion of early Christian references to infant baptism.[65]

Stokes went out of his way to revise Milner on virtually every point that challenged Protestant ideals. Where Milner had encouraged charitable readings of the Church Fathers, for example, Stokes inserted a warning: 'the student of the writings of the Fathers should also keep his attention continually directed to the word of God' to discern how the Fathers corrupted scriptural teaching.[66] Stokes consistently lessened or deleted Milner's praise for those in the Church hierarchy, especially his 'too favourable opinion of Gregory'.[67] While Milner had praised the 'unaffected humility of [Gregory's] whole life', Stokes removed this approbation, instead criticising the sixth-century bishop for his 'inclination for spiritual dominion'.[68] Stokes represented Boniface and Pope Eugenius III in less favourable lights than had Milner, and castigated Anselm and Bernard

[60] See ibid. 153–4.
[61] This publishing initiative is described in Aileen Fyfe, *Science and salvation: Evangelical popular science publishing in Victorian Britain*, Chicago 2004, 35, 48.
[62] This is quoted in Martin, *Evangelicals united*, 165–6.
[63] Milner, *History*, ii. 51, 231, 235.
[64] Ibid. ii. 290.
[65] George Stokes (ed.), *The history of the Church of Christ, previous to the Reformation*, London 1826, ii. 461.
[66] Ibid. ii. 304n.
[67] Ibid. iii. 52.
[68] Milner, *History*, iii. 58; Stokes, *History*, iii. 63.

for promoting the papacy while removing Milner's apology for their support.[69] Meanwhile, typical proto-Protestants, such as Arnold of Brescia (1090–1155), fared better. Milner argued that opposing the papacy was not grounds for inclusion as a real believer, and, given Arnold's flaws, refused to celebrate him. Stokes, in contrast, included Arnold without any criticism or censure.[70] In both selection and interpretation, Stokes more closely associated true Christianity with opposition to the papacy.

As it became more defensively Protestant, Stokes's version also grew more nationalistic. The editor deleted all Milner's unfavourable comparisons between modern Britain and the Catholic past, including his celebration of medieval missionary work.[71] The two accounts diverged on pre-Reformation Britain, with Stokes contradicting Milner by arguing that Bede's history presented 'not … a very pleasing picture of the state of religion in our country'.[72] While Milner acknowledged Britain's spiritual debt to Gregory the Great, Stokes presented a Britain subjected to the yoke of Rome.[73] Milner wrote that Anselm's advocacy on behalf of the Church hierarchy had made Protestant historians, particularly Foxe, far too critical of the eleventh-century archbishop;[74] Stokes replaced this apologetic with the very words of Foxe that Milner considered unfair.[75] Stokes's account presented Britain's Catholic past as tyrannical and spiritually bankrupt, while removing any criticism of the Protestant present.

By the time that was finished, Milner's *History* fitted more comfortably into the tradition of anti-Catholic historiography, a change that reflects the religious and political climate of the 1820s. During debates over Catholic Emancipation, when, Linda Colley has shown, the relationship between British identity and Protestantism was particularly contested, to suggest that Britain owed medieval Rome a spiritual debt was beyond the pale.[76] Promoting a relatively sympathetic history of the Catholic past ran the risk of dividing the Society's Evangelical members; that very year the British and Foreign Bible Society split over the Apocrypha controversy, a fate avoided by the RTS because its members were more uniformly antagonistic toward Roman Catholicism.[77] Stokes successfully responded to this

[69] For Boniface and Eugenius III compare Stokes, *History*, iii. 125ff, to Milner, *History*, iii. 194–209, 247. For Anselm and Bernard compare Stokes, *History*, iii. 228, 241ff. to Milner, *History*, iii. 339–42, 358–9.

[70] Milner, *History*, iii. 504; Stokes, *History*, iii. 271.

[71] Milner, *History*, iii. 295.

[72] Stokes, *History*, iii. 101.

[73] Milner, *History*, iii. 95; Stokes, *History*, iii. 52, 91–5.

[74] Milner, *History*, iii. 341.

[75] Stokes, *History*, iii. 228.

[76] See Linda Colley, *Britons: forging the nation, 1707–1837*, New Haven 1992, 7.

[77] For the Apocrypha controversy see Leslie Howsam, *Cheap Bibles: nineteenth-century publishing and the British and Foreign Bible Society*, Cambridge 1991. For anti-Catholicism in the RTS see Martin, *Evangelicals united*, 161.

anti-Catholic mood: an early review in *The Congregational Magazine* rejoiced that 'the passages which, in the original, excited in our minds no small degree of disgust, have been expunged'. At long last, the reviewer concluded, Evangelicals may 'make themselves acquainted with the earlier part of ecclesiastical history'.[78] And so they did, as, according to the RTS, Stokes' edition sold very well, such that in 1842 the Society reprinted it in tract form.[79] Stokes's retelling of Milner's story, in other words, satisfied an Evangelical readership that was increasingly characterised by anti-Catholicism.[80]

## *The American Sunday School Union's adaptation*

Six years after the RTS revision, the American Sunday School Union printed an adaptation of Milner's *History*. Like the RTS in Britain, the ASSU was an inter-denominational organisation determined to Christianise the nation through an expansive publication programme.[81] And, like its British counterpart, the ASSU aspired to print only 'those plain and simple gospel truths, which are peculiar to NO sect, but of vital importance to ALL'.[82] As the leading Evangelical church history, Milner's account was an ideal candidate for adaptation. The publication committee shortened Milner, supplemented it with details from

[78] 'List of new publications, with short notices', *Congregational Magazine* x/26 (1827), 100–1.

[79] The RTS noted that 'A very large number of this work has been sold': *The jubilee memorial of the Religious Tract Society*, London 1850, 97. See also the RTS report given in *Missionary Register*, London 1842, 325.

[80] John Wolffe argues that, from the 1830s, British Evangelicals were united by anti-Catholicism: *The Protestant crusade in Great Britain, 1829–1860*, Oxford 1991, 7. See also Edward Norman, *Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England*, London 1968; Susan M. Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism and nineteenth-century fiction*, Cambridge 2004; and Michael Wheeler, *The old enemies: Catholic and Protestant in nineteenth-century English culture*, Cambridge 2006.

[81] The definitive account of the ASSU's print initiative is found in Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday school: the formation of an American institution, 1790–1880*, New Haven 1988, 6off. The ASSU's publishing output, according to Boylan (p. 168), represented one of the most significant means of religious education in the early republic. For the founding purposes of the ASSU see ASSU, *First report*, Philadelphia 1824, 18; ASSU, *Ninth report*, Philadelphia 1833, 20. See also David Paul Nord, *Faith in reading: religious publishing and the birth of mass media in America*, New York 2004, 123, and Candy Gunther Brown, *The word in the world: Evangelical writing, publishing, and reading in America, 1789–1880*, Chapel Hill NC 2004.

[82] In the 1831 report, it was noted that 'that for many most valuable publications, the world is indebted to the London Religious Tract Society': ASSU, *Seventh report*, Philadelphia 1831, 13. For the ecumenical statement see ASSU, *Fourth report*, Philadelphia 1828, 10.

Mosheim's history, and printed the result as *Letters on ecclesiastical history* from the fictional Mrs Lyman to her children – a genre that tapped into cultural ideals of maternal religious instruction while also rendering Milner accessible to a young audience.[83]

Because the *Letters* intended to provide models of piety for its young readers, some of Milner's sympathetic portrait of pre-Reformation Christianity was retained. The faith of young men such as Origen and Ephraim the Syrian was celebrated, as were examples of godly motherhood, such as Monica, mother of Augustine of Hippo.[84] Figures in the Church hierarchy were not necessarily excluded from the account. 'Even a retired youth in America, in the nineteenth century', Mrs Lyman wrote, 'can find something in the life of a good bishop [Gregory the Great], who lived more than twelve hundred years ago.' Similarly, Boniface, Anselm and Bernard were praised, but without any mention of their support for the papacy.[85] Even though these figures were included, their Catholic characteristics were redacted. Milner's coterie of medieval believers, in the ASSU *Letters*, no longer wore a 'Roman garb'.

With its readership in mind, the *Letters* also simplified Milner's narrative, instructing children in the morals to be learned from the past.[86] How should nineteenth-century American children imitate early Christian martyrs? 'Sometimes the young suffer a kind of persecution from their gay companions', Mrs. Lyman ventured, 'being the subjects of satirical remarks, and undeserved ridicule. Now this same spirit would teach you to meet this ridicule with a calm and equal temper.'[87] Similar applications appeared throughout the *Letters*, with Mrs Lyman translating history into lessons appropriate for her readers. For example, Gregory the Great's care for the poor offered Mrs Lyman the opportunity to exhort her sons to fair business practices and honest bargaining in 'their intercourse with one another'.[88] In the ASSU edition, the saints of the Christian past functioned as instructors in nineteenth-century Protestant social and ethical norms.

Much like the RTS revision, the ASSU *Letters* distanced authentic Christianity from Catholic trappings. While Milner had praised the genuine, if superstitious, piety of the past, the *Letters* disparaged medieval faith. Mrs Lyman ridiculed the doctrine of eucharistic 'real presence', which was obviously 'at variance with common sense'.[89] Milner's

[83] See Boylan, *Sunday school*, 116–17.
[84] ASSU, *Letters on ecclesiastical history*, Philadelphia 1832, i. 133.
[85] Gregory is treated ibid. i. 172. For her accounts of the other three see i. 200–1, 258–9, 264.
[86] The pedagogical tone was often explicit in reminders to keep the Sabbath, to attend to daily prayers, or not to neglect Scripture reading: ibid. i. 21.
[87] Ibid. i. 77. [88] Ibid. i. 168. [89] Ibid. i. 253.

admissions that men who had supported the papacy or misunderstood justification by faith were yet genuine believers all disappeared in the ASSU adaptation. When medieval developments were discussed, they were explicitly connected to the decline of the 'true spirit of Christianity'.[90] The ASSU revision, in its moralising and de-Catholicising approach, sought to disarm the past of its potential to confuse young Protestants.

Even more than Stokes's revision, the ASSU *Letters* took on a patriotic tone. Mrs Lyman repeatedly compared the Christian past unfavourably to nineteenth-century American democracy, freedom of religion and disestablishment. For example, the fourth-century Arian controversy, she wrote, 'ought to make us grateful that the government of our country has no control over its religion. You, my dear sons, will, I hope, grow up with an abhorrence of any plan or principle which shall lead to a connexion between the Church and the government of the country'.[91] Milner had used stories of persecution to criticise the apathy and luxury of his own context; Mrs. Lyman, in contrast, described horrific martyrdoms in order to inspire thanks 'for our happy government, and that freedom of thought and expression, which is enjoyed by the most obscure member of our republic'.[92] In contrast to Milner's narrative, in this history the Protestant present was vastly superior to the Christian past.

The ASSU revision emerged during the first wave of anti-Catholic publishing that, in the 1830s, proliferated in response to increasing Catholic immigration.[93] As Jon Gjerde demonstrates, antebellum Protestants saw Catholics as a threat not only to true religion, but also to democracy and society as a whole.[94] This fear is explicit in the ASSU *Letters*, with Mrs Lyman warning her children that '[Catholicism] may yet prevail to a great extent in the United States, unless the people are enlightened by an early acquaintance with the word of God'.[95] If the young reader did not devote herself to Protestantism, the nation might fall back into the dark ages. The function of this anti-Catholic print culture, Candy Gunther Brown explains, was to unite Protestant denominations against a common enemy while constructing an imagined community of Evangelical readers.[96] The ASSU's reconstruction of Milner's *History* embodied this purpose, mobilising children to defend the Protestant nation against the threat of the Catholic past, and, along the way, reversing

[90] Ibid. i. 81. [91] Ibid. i. 95–6. [92] Ibid. i. 68.

[93] On the growth of anti-Catholic sentiment in the United States from 1830 see Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: the antebellum Protestant encounter with Catholicism*, Berkeley 1994; Jody M. Roy, 'Nineteenth-century American anti-Catholicism and the Catholic response', unpubl. PhD diss. Bloomington, In 1997; and Mark Stephen Massa, *Anti-Catholicism in America: the last acceptable prejudice*, New York 2003.

[94] Jon Gjerde, *Catholicism and the shaping of nineteenth-century America*, New York 2012.

[95] ASSU, *Letters on ecclesiastical history*, i. 251. 'p'

[96] Brown, *The word in the world*, 40.

Milner's direction of critique in order to demonstrate the superiority of Protestant religion.

### *Robert B. Seeley's adaptation*

In 1834 Robert B. Seeley (1798–1886), London author and publisher, revised Milner's *History* for his 'Christian Family's Library' series. The *History* included an Evangelical defence of the establishment, and Seeley, as an Evangelical churchman, was eager to promote this cause during a time of increasing Evangelical secessions from the Church of England.[97] As he edited, however, Seeley concluded that he must 'change the form of the history' to better account for the Church's fall into papal apostasy.[98] Seeley retained much of Milner's language, his relatively charitable account of monasticism, and his defence of Gregory the Great.[99] However, he dissented from Milner's project of tracing the true Church beyond the sixth century. 'Instead … of following our author in his search after the scattered fragments of the true church', Seeley explained, 'we shall here break off the narrative, resuming it under the more natural form of a HISTORY OF THE PAPACY.'[100]

It was twelve years before Seeley printed the next volume. He had wrestled with how to revise Milner's account of medieval Christianity, given its neglect of the 'total and … fatal' fall of the Church. Seeley decided that he could not simply make changes to Milner's narrative, as 'an individual, here and there, cannot be called "the Church of Christ"'. His account would not, 'with Milner, devote much attention to isolated individuals of the Romish communion' but rather would only celebrate those whom Rome had persecuted.[101] Milner's favourite medievals did not fare well in Seeley's retelling, which referenced Boniface, Eugenius III and Celestine V without mention of their piety.[102] Bernard of Clairvaux 'was an earnest and self-denying servant of the apostate church', Seeley wrote. 'Whether he belonged to Christ's true church, is a question on which we shall offer no opinion.' Seeley celebrated the sects persecuted by Bernard, while bitterly noting that 'this celebrated monk proved himself a most useful servant of the Papacy'.[103] Anselm's name never

[97] For an account of these secessions, and the anxiety that they produced in the Church see Grayson Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals: Protestant secessions from the via media, c. 1800–1850*, Oxford 2001. In 1834 Seeley published a defence of establishment that argued that secession was unjustifiable: Leslie Howsam, 'Seeley, Robert Benton (1798–1886)', *ODNB*.

[98] Robert B. Seeley, *The history of the Church of Christ*, London 1834, p. v.

[99] Ibid. 524, 529, 537.

[100] Ibid. 538.

[101] Idem *The Church of Christ in the Middle Ages*, London 1845, pp. vi–vii, 2.

[102] Ibid. 152–3, 291.

[103] Ibid., 290–1.

appeared at all. In Seeley's narrative, only proto-Protestants and medieval dissenters were included as faithful believers. A project that began as an adaptation of Milner's *History* ended up a thorough rebuttal of his account of medieval Christianity, and a return to the Protestant historical norms exemplified by Mosheim and Arnold.

Seeley's departures from Milner are explained in part by shifting ecclesial context. In 1845 Seeley was less concerned with Evangelical secessions from the Church of England than with Roman Catholic advances within it.[104] Eager to disarm the Tractarians of their historical argumentation, Seeley's *History* was an extended case against the historiography produced by William Palmer (1803–85) and John Henry Newman (1801–90). Seeley's account also embodies the post-1830 shift in British Evangelicalism, when, according to David Bebbington, the combination of premillennial historicism and increased Irish immigration produced a more militant anti-Catholicism within the movement.[105] While Milner had been eager to showcase the perpetuity of Christ's faithful through the Middle Ages, Seeley was driven to demonstrate the fulfilment of biblical prophecy in the Church's fall into apostasy. How Evangelicals received this revision is difficult to ascertain, as the publications that reviewed other editions of Milner did not review Seeley's. His first volume was successful enough to merit a second printing in 1844; his second volume emerged in the year when the Maynooth controversy re-energised anti-Catholic sentiment.[106] In this context, a work that eviscerated the Catholic past and cast church history in apocalyptic terms must have resonated with not a few Evangelical readers.

Other nineteenth-century adaptations of Milner contrast with and illuminate the revisionary approach of the RTS, ASSU and Seeley. Two early American editions, an 1816 abridgement by the Presbyterian minister Jesse Townsend (1766–1838) and an 1817 adaptation for Sunday Schools by the teacher Rebecca Eaton, closely followed Milner's interpretations of Anselm, Bernard and other medieval Christians.[107] Likewise, an 1836 abridgement by the Scottish Reformed bookseller Thomas Nelson (1780–1861) did not modify any of Milner's conclusions.[108] The edition 'revised and corrected' in 1847 by the Anglican Thomas Grantham (1795–1864) modified Milner on the errors pointed out by

[104] In 1839 Seeley wrote an anti-Catholic treatise, *Essays on Romanism*, London 1839, and, by the mid-1840s, was a vocal critic of the Tractarians.

[105] See Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in modern Britain*, 100–2.

[106] See Norman, *Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England*, and Donald Lewis, *Lighten their darkness: the Evangelical mission to working-class London, 1828–1860*, New York 1986.

[107] Jesse Townsend, *The history of the Church of Christ*, Utica, NY 1816; Rebecca Eaton, *An abridgment of Milner's church history*, Andover, MA 1817.

[108] Joseph Milner, *The history of the Church of Christ*, ed. Thomas Nelson, Edinburgh 1836.

Maitland, particularly in his account of the Waldensians. Grantham retained Milner's overall narrative, however, promising that 'the admirers of Milner will find nothing to regret, and the lovers of accuracy not a little to commend'.[109] The faithfulness of these editors, and the ongoing printing of Milner's original account through the 1830s and 1840s, clarifies that not all nineteenth-century Evangelicals were ill-disposed to Milner's approach. However, in every instance where Milner's interpretations were significantly edited, the account became more critical of the Catholic past. And, as certain constituencies within the Evangelical milieu grew more virulently anti-Catholic, organisations committed to pan-Evangelical cooperation were unwilling to reproduce Milner's narrative wholesale. The ASSU and RTS editors recognised that Milner's *History* must be modified before it could contribute to their inter-denominational mission.

This contested publication history underscores the revisionary strain in Milner's account and the cultural, indeed political, significance of this revision. By eschewing a strict doctrinal formulation of genuine Christianity, and relativising his own age in relation to the Catholic past, Milner produced a history that departed from prior Protestant norms. While Milner remained thoroughly Protestant in his theology, his Evangelical aims led him to identify with notable medieval Christians and to critique the shortcomings of the Protestant present. In contrast to the literature on Milner, he included many whom he considered mistaken about justification by faith. Gregory the Great's missionary zeal, Bernard's devotion and Anselm's theological writing were each reminiscent of Evangelical piety, and Milner presented them as genuine Christians who 'wore a Roman garb', at the same time Catholic and Evangelical.[110] Milner's *History*, then, shows late eighteenth-century Evangelical concerns, particularly the fear of Protestant rationalism, undermining typical Protestant accounts of the Christian past. In his generosity toward medieval Christians, Milner anticipated later favourable histories, such as H. H. Milman's *History of Latin Christianity* (1854–5) or Philip Schaff's *History of the Christian Church* (1858–90). That these were more original, critical and influential works than Milner's should not obscure his irenicism.

Some of Milner's editors, however, were far less comfortable coupling Evangelical faith with the errors of Rome, and the ASSU, RTS and Seeley editions either castigated the Catholicism of figures such as Bernard or Anselm or avoided mentioning it altogether. These revisions reflect a growing concern among some Evangelicals that a too-generous account of the medieval Church might confuse the reader, or, worse, lead her to Rome. In the United States, this fear not only shaped Sunday School

[109] Idem, *The history of the Church of Christ*, ed. Thomas Grantham, London 1847, pp. v–vi.

[110] Idem, *History*, iii, p. iv.

literature but also seminary education: in the 1820s Andover Seminary's faculty reserved the study of church history for seminarians' final year, as only then might they safely explore 'the labyrinth of opinions and controversies found in the history of the church'.[111] This caution is all the more noteworthy in light of the seminary's reliance on Milner as a textbook.[112]

To be fair, losing readers to Rome was not an unfounded fear. In 1816 a young Evangelical named John Henry Newman picked up Milner's account and was captivated by his portrayal of the early Church: 'I read Joseph Milner's Church History, and was nothing short of enamoured of the long extracts from St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, and the other Fathers which I found there.'[113] Even after Newman's conversion to Roman Catholicism, he praised the Evangelical *History* for giving him an 'imaginative devotion' to the Church Fathers, which 'saved him from the danger' of a cold or latitudinarian faith.[114] Milner sought to redeem the Catholic past from the cynicism of Mosheim, Hume and Gibbon, but, in Newman's case, he succeeded too well. Milner's *History* may have, as Walsh notes, converted a number of Ministers of Parliament to the Evangelical faith, but it also started a young Evangelical down the road to Rome.[115] The RTS, ASSU and Seeley, in contrast, were determined to ensure that their readers would remain thoroughly Protestant.

Not only the soul of the individual reader but also the soul of the nation was at stake. Writing in the 1780s and '90s, Milner constructed his narrative to contrast real Christianity with nominal Protestantism; in the 1820s and '30s, the RTS, ASSU and Seeley were less concerned with scepticism than with Rome. Particularly in a moment when the religious identities of both Britain and the United States were politically contested, the Christian past presented a problem for Evangelicals. As Susan Griffin has argued, it was precisely because of their shared history that Catholics appeared to nineteenth-century Protestants as 'at once familiar and unfamiliar, homely and foreign'.[116] Church history had the power to undermine or heighten antipathy to Catholicism. That Milner's most revisionary interpretations were reversed by two organisations committed to national evangelisation shows the extent to which Milner destabilised a historical narrative that was increasingly useful in a context of contested Protestant nationhood. The RTS, ASSU and Seeley portrayed pre-Reformation Christianity as proto-Protestant, producing historical

[111] This decision is documented in Leonard Woods, *History of the Andover Theological Seminary*, Boston 1885, 188.

[112] The Andover library, in 1819, boasted ten copies of Milner's *History*, one of Mosheim's and one Magdeburg *Centuries*: *Catalogue of the library*, 96.

[113] John Henry C. Newman, *Apologia pro vita sua*, London 1864, 62.

[114] Idem, *Autobiographical writings*, ed. Henry Tristram, London 1956, 83.

[115] Walsh, 'Joseph Milner's Evangelical church history', 174.

[116] Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism*, 8, 5.

accounts that served the project of imagining Britain and the United States as Protestant communities. Nineteenth-century religious nationalism, in other words, blunted the subversive edge of Evangelical historiography, and Milner's account was made to align with conventional Protestant representations of the Christian past.