Review

Alexander Knox: Neglected Progenitor of the Oxford Movement

David McCready, (2020) *The Life and Theology of Alexander Knox: Anglicanism in the Age of Enlightenment and Romanticism*. Anglican and Episcopal Theology and History, 6. Leiden: Brill. ISBN: 978-90-04-35522-4 (pbk), €59.00, \$69.00; 978-90-04-42698-6 (e-book), €121.00 \$140.00.

The authoritative *Oxford History of Anglicanism*, volume two, covering the period 1662–1829, makes no mention of the subject of David McCready's highly informative intellectual biography, Alexander Knox (1757–1831), though Knox does receive a fleeting mention in Volume three.¹ Nor does Knox's name appear in Jeremy Morris's acclaimed and seminal *The High Church Revival in the Church of England*, published in the same series as McCready's volume.² Nor does Knox appear even in *The Oxford Handbook of the Oxford Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Given that the sub-title of McCready's study is 'Anglicanism in the Age of Enlightenment and Romanticism', this *lacuna* in the *Oxford History of Anglicanism* volume two in particular, is all the more surprising. It is an omission which helps to demonstrate the need for this volume.

The author's task is to make good the implicit claims of his title – to demonstrate the importance of this Irish Anglican, High Church, lay-theologian not

- 1 Jeremy Gregory (ed.), *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, Volume II: Establishment and Empire, 1662–1829* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Rowan Strong (ed.), *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, Volume III: Partisan Anglicanism and its Global Expansion, 1829–c.1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 143.
- 2 Jeremy Morris, *The High Church Revival in the Church of England*, Anglican and Episcopal Theology and History, 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

only in his own biographical terms but in the context of the wider religious and intellectual climate of his age. A comparison is invited with other more well-known contemporary seminal thinkers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher in Germany and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in England. The introduction sets out the author's case, noting and discussing previous examinations of Knox before mapping out the parameters of his study and the sources on which it draws. The latter point is important because McCready makes it clear that Knox's writings were far more extensive than his published two-volume *Thirty Years' Correspondence* with John Jebb, Bishop of Limerick, edited by Charles Forster (1834), and his four-volume *Remains* (1836–37) and other extant published *oeuvres* might suggest. This fact helps to account for the comparative neglect into which Knox's theology and influence have fallen. However, the author fully acknowledges previous studies of Knox including those by G. T. Stokes, Yngve Brilioth, J. R. H. Moorman, George Wynne Hughes, J. Baird Ewens, John Gunstone, Michael Thompson, Peter Barrett, as well as by the present reviewer. The introduction also sets the whole tone for the abiding characteristic of this study – it is methodically clear, thorough, indeed exhaustive, and well-structured.

Following Michel Foucault's dictum, 'The work is more than the work: the subject who writes is part of the work', the author devotes his first chapter to an examination of Knox's life, touching only very briefly on the political and ecclesiastical background to the period in which he lived. McCready plots Knox's early years and discipleship association with John Wesley, his period of public service as private secretary to the then newly appointed Chief Secretary for Ireland, Lord Castlereagh, and his subsequent retirement to Dawson Street, Dublin, from 1799 onwards. Thereafter, Knox described himself as 'a hermit'. Nonetheless, he interacted with leading academics at Trinity College such as George Miller and its Provost, Charles Elrington (1787–1850). Moreover, he became the centre of an admiring religious circle both at Dawson Street and at Bellevue, the home of his friends Peter and Elizabeth La Touche, where he was in almost constant residence. Knox's long friendship with John Jebb (1775–1833), who became the Bishop of Limerick, and to whom he acted as guide and mentor, is rightly highlighted. Charles Forster aptly summed up their relationship and respective influence: 'If Mr Knox be Socrates, Mr Jebb is Plato.' The fact of Knox's life-long poor health, and his afflictions with epilepsy and depression, is noted. The controversy following Knox's death, over whether or not on his deathbed he had embraced an Evangelical understanding of Christianity is mentioned, though at this particular point in the text more on the ascendancy of Irish Evangelicalism in the period would have rendered that episode more significant. McCready notes Knox's irenic but nuanced attitude

to Roman Catholicism – friendly and favourable to Catholic Emancipation but on the expectation that this might lead to a reformation or ‘enlightenment’ of Roman Catholicism prior to any reconciliation with Anglicanism. Knox was also insistent that Rome had retained many elements of what he called ‘original Catholicity’. Knox’s complaint in 1819 at the extent to which ‘Calvinism’ was spreading through the Irish Church is noted (p. 13). However and surprisingly, there is no mention of what William Magee (1766–1831), the Archbishop of Dublin, in his first archiepiscopal charge in 1822, called the ‘Second Reformation’ or Bible War, with its Irish Protestant evangelization crusades in western Ireland, or Knox’s view of it. That there is no mention of John Nelson Darby (1800–82), a voice of the Evangelical Millennialism that took hold in contemporary Ireland, can be explained by Knox’s own conscious distancing himself from ‘the present millenarian speculation’ (p. 228).

The second chapter explores Knox’s relationship to Anglicanism. This topic, as defined in these terms, might seem problematic. The recently published five-volume *Oxford History of Anglicanism* series rightly proposes that ‘Anglicanism’ was not a version of Christianity recognizable by that name for at least the first century of the reformed Church of England’s existence and that thereafter it was debated and contested and long retained a mixed and ambiguous ecclesiastical identity (ambiguity was almost hard-wired into the Elizabethan settlement of 1559). McCready acknowledges that the term had scarcely gained currency even during Knox’s own lifetime, with Knox himself being one of the first to use the term ‘Anglican’ regularly (p. 2). Its usage and common currency as an ‘-ism’ is normally recognized as having been introduced somewhat later, reputedly by Newman in first edition of his *Lectures on the Prophetic Office of the Church* (1837). A special plea has recently been made to justify using the appellation ‘Anglicanism’ for an earlier period in spite of the danger of anachronism – with a claim recently made that French Catholic writers first used the term in the eighteenth century,³ though it may have been Lamennais who first used the French *anglicanisme* in 1817.⁴ However, this was arguably a merely national descriptor, a counterpart to *gallicanisme*, and did not denote a distinctive theological position which was only later attached to the term. However, what matters here is that McCready puts forward a persuasive argument that Knox made a substantial contribution to the definition of

3 Rowan Strong, ‘Series Introduction’, *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, Volume II: Establishment and Empire, 1662–1829*, ed. Jeremy Gregory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. xx–xxi.

4 Paul Avis, ‘What is Anglicanism’, in Stephen Sykes, John Booty and Jonathan Knight (eds), *The Study of Anglicanism*, Revised Edition (London: SPCK/Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 461.

what 'Anglicanism' came to mean theologically, particularly in terms of theological method – the three-fold appeal to Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. In short, he successfully unpacks Knox's theory of what it meant to be 'Anglican' – essentially adherence to the principle of 'Catholic Consent', enshrined in the Book of Common Prayer, as the touchstone for doctrine and liturgical practice. On the other hand, Knox's devotion to heart religion aligned him in some ways with contemporary English Evangelicals such as William Wilberforce (1759–1833) and also Hannah More (1745–1833) with whom he enjoyed a good *rapproch*, influencing her in some ways while differing in ecclesiology. Knox's spiritual sensitivities made him appreciative of even Puritan or Protestant Nonconformist examples of spirituality such as Richard Baxter (1615–91) and Philip Doddridge (1702–51). In this, as on some other points, Knox distanced himself from those whom he called 'the old High Church race'.

One of the distinguishing elements of McCready's study is his determination to establish conclusively not only Knox's close theological relationship with John Wesley, but even to claim that Knox largely derived his 'High Church Anglicanism' as well as his admiration for the Greek Fathers and the Platonic tradition from Wesley. Chapter three focuses on this relationship and is thus pivotal. However, it raises as many questions as it answers. Knox had known Wesley from his childhood days and fifteen years of correspondence testifies to their intimacy. McCready produces much evidence for Knox's knowledge of Wesley's theology, and shows that they both shared an emphasis on *praxis* over dogma. He points to the success of Knox's defence of Wesley, in his *Remarks on the Life and Character of John Wesley* (1828), against the critique mounted by the poet Robert Southey. Southey found Knox's *Remarks* persuasive and allowed it to be appended to the third edition (1846) of his own original *Life of Wesley* (1820). Although McCready seems, to this reviewer, somewhat to underplay the substantive theological differences between Knox and Wesley, evident in Knox's *Remarks*, this is essentially a question of emphasis and of the relative apportioning of evidence that cuts both ways.⁵ McCready duly acknowledges a divergence on issues of soteriology and anthropology, and on the doctrine of prevenient grace (an aspect of Wesley's teaching which Knox, for reasons that McCready explains, ignored). However, he maintains that Knox's ecclesiology reflects 'the Catholic and High Church aspects of Wesley's teaching', though he concedes that it was 'his theory rather than practice' (p. 225). I would suggest that differences of ecclesiology between the two were more significant than McCready allows. Knox preferred to rest Wesley's spiritual greatness on his

5 See my 'Reactions to Robert Southey's *Life of Wesley* (1820) Reconsidered', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 63:1 (January, 2012), pp. 61–80.

individual piety rather than on his role as the organising founder of Methodism with its potential for separatism in the longer term. The later Wesley (from the 1740s onwards), in terms of ecclesiology, both theory and practice, moved further, rather than nearer, the High Church standard which he had rigidly upheld in his earlier years and which Knox continued to uphold.

Chapter four covers Knox's debt, like Wesley's, to the Christian Platonic tradition as represented in the patristic period by such divines as Clement of Alexandria and John Chrysostom and characterised by a doctrine of *theosis* or deification. McCready shows how Knox identified with this tradition and proceeds to explore those writers in whom Knox believed the Platonic tradition to have been revived: the so-called Anglican moderates of the seventeenth century and John Wesley himself, considered here as a Christian Platonist.

After what the author calls this diachronic treatment, chapter five situates Knox within the context of his times, examining his relationship to the Enlightenment and to Romanticism, which is the sub-text of the book as a whole. Knox is discussed as a 'Romantic theologian', as well as sharing certain theological traits in accord with the 'Age of Reason', such as optimism and a respect for scientific method. There is a rich recent scholarly literature on the concept of 'religious enlightenment', in the sense of recovering 'light' from 'darkness' in terms of spiritual knowledge (stemming from Reformation divinity) and of an orthodox 'Counter-Enlightenment'. This literature makes clear that the term Enlightenment is not a single or unifier phenomenon. It encompassed clerical as well as secular, orthodox as well as heterodox manifestations. McCready judiciously concludes that while it may have been shaped by an Enlightenment intellectual inheritance, Knox's theology was not a creation of the Enlightenment. McCready shows that Knox's stress on religious experience, imagination and the 'subjective element in Christianity' can be construed as reactions against the narrow rationalism associated with the Enlightenment and in favour of Romanticism. This subjective emphasis might appear to be less in accord with the 'objective' nature of much High Church thought. However, Sheridan Gilley has explained how the two might be reconciled in his apt phrase the 'churching of Romanticism'.⁶ Having built up Knox's affinity with the Romantic *zeitgeist*, McCready then offsets or qualifies this by a reminder of Knox's 'constant appeal to "the Judgment of the Church, Ancient and Anglican"' (p. 106).

6 See Sheridan Gilley, 'John Keble and the Victorian Churching of Romanticism', in J.R. Watson (ed.), *An Infinite Complexity: Essays in Romanticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983), 226-39.

There follows an apparent change of gear and the second half of the volume is devoted to a more purely theological treatment of Knox, though it is not as if that aspect had not been prominent also in the first. Chapter six is devoted to Knox's 'own theology' and the distinctive characteristics which McCready ascribes to it: 'consistent, practical, eclectic, and "philosophic"'. Chapter seven examines Knox's theological methodology, claiming that in 'true post-Enlightenment fashion' he treated theology as a scientific quest for truth and applied reason to Scripture. As ever though, McCready is careful to balance this aspect of Knox with his High Church interpretative principle of the *consensus omnium*, as well as his stress on the importance of an experiential knowledge of Christianity. The succeeding five chapters (eight to twelve) offer a very detailed and insightful if somewhat dense and technical analysis of Knox's theological teaching on various specific topics: God and Humanity; Christology and Pneumatology; Justification and Perfection; the sacraments (baptism and the Eucharist); Providence and Predestination. Of these, Knox's doctrine of Justification and to a lesser extent his high doctrine of the Eucharist (he preferred the 1549 Prayer Book as more patristic) were the most significant. The former, which rejected a purely forensic Justification of imputed righteousness in favour of a moral Justification of infused righteousness, represented a key point of disagreement with his Evangelical friends, notably Irish ones such as Robert Daly (1783–1872), later the Bishop of Cashel. Moreover, they represented precisely those two areas of Knox's teaching, along with the Rule of St Vincent of Lerins' principle of 'Catholic Consent', which have been most commonly regarded as forerunners or precursors of the Oxford Movement and which later Evangelical critics of the Tractarians linked back to the Irish layman. It is Knox's undoubted kinship with the Oxford Movement, particularly Newman but also Hurrell Froude, Edward Pusey and Isaac Williams, along with others on the Tractarian periphery such as W. E. Gladstone, which McCready discusses in the context of Knox's wider influence in his final chapter (thirteen).

In a seminal essay published in 1887, G. T. Stokes argued that Knox was 'the secret, the unacknowledged, but none the less real fount and origin' of the Oxford Movement: 'Knox begat Jebb, and Jebb begat Rose and Pusey and Newman'. This was a controversial and sweeping claim, and those closest to the Movement, notably its first historian, R. W. Church, as well as Pusey's biographer H. P. Liddon, decisively rejected it. McCready rightly highlights the ambiguity of Newman's own attitude towards Knox. On the one hand, Newman regarded Knox as an original thinker, 'highly gifted', 'sagacious', and

'an acute observer', and especially commended his doctrine of the Eucharist.⁷ On the other hand, as McCready notes from the evidence of Newman's correspondence with Knox's editor, J. J. Hornby, Newman also had theological objections to Knox's teaching. These included the doctrines of the apostolic succession and the priesthood, in which Newman found Knox's views to be defective. Newman regarded Knox as too 'eclectic', too much of a 'subjectivist', too inclined to extenuate Protestant nonconformity. He probably would have agreed with John Keble's critical estimate: '[I]t is rather an arrogant position in which Mr Knox delighted to imagine himself, as one on the top of a high hill, seeing which way different schools tend (the school of Primitive Antiquity being but one among many) and passing judgment upon each, how far it is right, and how well it suited its time.' For Newman, Knox seemed 'to say dangerous things ... Froude did not like him'. Knox's lay status also told against him in Newman's eyes. For that reason, Newman and Pusey had a more unequivocal regard for Knox's friend and soul-mate Bishop Jebb. Their preference led Hornby to complain that, while Jebb was 'put forward' by the Tractarians, 'his Great Master', Alexander Knox, was 'depreciated'. Certainly it was Jebb's *The Peculiar Character of the Church of England*, with its *Appendix*, of 1815 which had the more direct formative influence on Newman's formulation of the *via media*. Nonetheless, qualifications notwithstanding, Knox can be claimed as a precursor of Tractarianism in the broad and loose sense of offering an 'ecclesial form of the Romantic movement in England'. Like the Tractarians, Knox complained that a fear of Popery had deprived the Church of England of great treasures of devotion and had fostered a neglect of 'inward religion' which had then sought other outlets.⁸

One of the challenges of intellectual biography is to show the connections between the external life and actions of the subject in the context of his or her times on the one hand and the internal life of the subject's mind on the other. Knox's public life is understated and is only relatively briefly covered in

7 Knox's treatises on the Eucharist, taken from his *Remains*, were republished in a single volume in 1838. According to Newman's pupil and disciple Samuel Francis Wood (1809–43), writing in 1840, Knox's 'Treatise on the Sacraments, only of late years made *publici juris*', was 'peculiarly adapted to lead minds onward to Catholic views'. [S. F. Wood], 'Revival of Primitive Doctrine' [1840]; see James Pereiro, *'Ethos' and the Oxford Movement: At the Heart of Tractarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 'Appendices', p. 262.

8 Samuel Wood, was probably echoing the view of his mentor Newman, when he wrote in 1840 that Knox's writings had 'greatly contributed to overthrow the narrow dogmatism of the Calvinistic school, and to inculcate more inward and living principles of piety'; Pereiro, [Wood], 'Revival of Primitive Doctrine', p. 262.

one chapter. Yet Knox's active involvement in Irish affairs of state in the 1790s was actually historically significant in preparing for the Act of Union (1801) and spawned his *Essays on the Political Circumstances of Ireland* (1799), while as late as 1811 Castlereagh tried in vain to get him to write an official account of the passing of the union. However, McCready triumphantly succeeds in his forensic analysis of the mind and theology of Alexander Knox. He is to be congratulated on recovering Knox from relative obscurity and for revealing him to be an important scientific theologian in his own right as well as a representative of the Neo-Platonic tradition within Anglicanism. The study fittingly complements a recent biography of Knox's life-long friend correspondent, Bishop Jebb, which is also set within a wider Anglican context.⁹ McCready perceptively analyses the many and varied and more technical components of Knox's theology, especially his Christology and Pneumatology. Knox emerges as an acute exponent of what has come to be regarded as the Anglican theological method and as one with something to offer current religious discourse. McCready unpacks and nuances the complex relationship of Knox's thought with the Enlightenment and Romanticism, in so far as is possible in a short space, though some questions on the nature of those categories remain unanswered. However, this reviewer is inclined to think that McCready, while presenting contrary evidence, pushes the particular influence of John Wesley on Knox rather too far and over too long a time-frame. One also wishes for a more sustained engagement with the complex relationship of Knox with the Oxford Movement in its broader sense of an 'Anglican Renaissance' or what Brilioth in his seminal *The Anglican Revival* (1925) called 'Neo-Anglicanism'. The final conclusion is essentially a summation of what has gone before. This is useful but it could also have been an opportunity to pull together in a more rounded way the varied and disparate strands of this study, especially the linkages between Knox's thought and his lived experience and the Irish context. However, perhaps the answer to the latter point is that so much of Knox's influence as a layman, 'the sage of Bellevue', was necessarily through his conversation – 'his chamber was a church and his chair a pulpit'.¹⁰ The volume has some repetitive sections (particularly the

9 Alan Acheson, *Bishop Jebb and the Nineteenth-Century Anglican Renaissance* (Toronto: Clements Academic, 2013).

10 The words of Bishop Jebb, echoing those applied to John Hales. *Thirty Years' Correspondence*, vol. 1. p. 160.

recapitulations at the end of each chapter) and occasionally betrays its origin as a Trinity College Dublin Ph.D. thesis. These minor quibbles apart, this book can nonetheless be wholeheartedly recommended as a highly scholarly, meticulously and deeply researched intellectual portrait of a much neglected figure. It is a work from which the more general as well as the specialist reader should learn much. It deserves to stand as the definitive and most comprehensive study of Alexander Knox for years to come.

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