CHAPTER TWO

THREE GENERATIONS OF CHRISTOPHERSONS: TANNER TO CLERGYMAN TO PHYSICIAN

The Taint of the Tannery

Years ago in England, anxious to visit one cradle of Christopherson family history, a cousin and I motored up the M6 to Colton in Cumbria. Our intent was to visit Colton House and look for the local church. It was spring; the countryside shone with that bright emerald green one associates more with Ireland. Sheep were everywhere and cars were few. Colton House is now a rest home, smelling of boiled cabbage and bringing back memories of boarding school dinners. It had not always been a Christopherson home. Grandfather Christopherson (born in 1811), a tanner, had lived in a nearby hamlet in much humbler circumstances.

Colton House came into the family later when the tanner’s educated brother, Rev. Arthur Christopherson, later Vicar of Caton in Lancashire, bought it for his retirement. This grey stone house sits in a pretty one-acre garden protected from the wicked Cumbrian wind by mature trees surrounding the perimeter. A stone’s throw away on the hill behind stands Colton church, begun in the late fifteenth century. It cannot be said to be attractive. The exterior is stuccoed with some dark material that becomes even gloomier when the rain hits, which is frequently. Yet here they all worshipped on Sundays (and were sometimes fined for non-attendance) and here in this churchyard many Christophersons are buried.

Family Origins

The Christopherson name surfaces frequently in North Lancashire. It is said to come from Scandinavia in the year 900 when a wave of Norsemen invaded England. The Christophersons are certainly well documented by the early sixteenth century. The people living in this bulge of land
in north-west Lancashire, around Ulverston and Furness, were cut off for generations from mainstream England by virtue of poor roads.

The intrepid traveller and journalist, Celia Fiennes, who made what was termed the Great Journey of 1689, passed through the town of Kendal and on to Penrith, a little east of Colton, where Brian the tanner lived 120 years later. Not much escaped her critical eye. “...its a goode tradeing town mostly famed for the cottons:...and a great deale of leather tann’d here and all sorts of commoditiyes...” she said of Kendal.

A bit farther north and certainly near the well-known Lake District, Celia Fiennes took pains to note the poverty: “Here I came to villages of sad little hutts made up of drye walls, only stones piled together and the roofs of same slatt;...I tooke them at first sight for a sort of houses or barns to fodder cattle in, noting them to be dwelling houses,...it must needs be very cold dwellings but it shews something of the lazy-ness of the people...”

The Irish Sea is to the west, and to the south the dangerous shifting quicksands and tides of Morecambe Bay where a guide, a man on the white horse, could be seen guiding the peasants and merchants to safety at low tide. In the north, towards Scotland, marauding bands of various troublemakers and ruffians were known to come tearing over the border to disturb and wreak havoc. The only way in from the main body of England, other than by sea, was via narrow, flint-stone roads. It was around 1840 that Wordsworth immortalized the lakes a few miles north of the Christophersons’ home and deplored the coming of the railway in the 1850s that would bring tourists destined to spoil the wild beauty. The people worked the land and kept sheep; some were charcoal burners. The early Christophersons were blacksmiths, tanners and small farmers, but we know of one, Bryan Christopherson of nearby Penny Bridge, who was involved in the slave trade in 1752. Tanner Brian (b. 1811) was second in a family of twelve. When he married Mary High of nearby Walney Island, two sons, Thomas (b. 1835) and Brian

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1 The counties were re-figured in 1974. North Lancashire is now in Cumbria.
3 Ibid. p. 196.
4 In February 2004 nineteen Chinese cockle pickers drowned, surprised by the fast moving tide in Morecambe Bay.