

U DX264

**Items relating to Conrad Noel
and Stanley Evans**

1895-[1963]

Biographical Background:

Conrad le Despenser Roden Noel was born on 12 July 1869 at Kew. His family was titled and in royal service: his grandfather was the earl of Gainsborough, his aunt was lady in waiting to the queen and his father, Roden Noel, was a groom of the privy chamber. Roden Noel was a poet (Collected Poems [1902]) and biographer of Lord Byron. His mother, Alice de Broe, was the daughter of a Swiss banker. Her health was poor and the Noels frequently 'wintered' in Italy, leaving Conrad with his grandmother, Lady Gainsborough. His mother was an evangelical and his grandmother a Calvinist, making his early religious background rather austere. He attended school at Winchester and Cheltenham, an experience he found unpleasant (he was bullied senselessly), and his later behaviour at Corpus Christi College in Cambridge was so outlandish that it ended with being sent down for a year and not taking his degree (Bellamy & Saville, Dictionary of Labour Biography, ii, pp.276-7; Dyson, Paragon Review, p.11).

However, Conrad Noel took away from Cambridge his first meaningful and enduring conversion; reading J L Joynes's The Socialist Catechism and hearing a lecture by Annie Besant turned him into a convinced socialist. Back at home in Brighton private tuition by Herman Joynes was arranged prior to entry into Chichester Theological College in 1893. Noel was very attracted to Roman Catholicism, but emerged from this period of study converted for a second time, this time to high church Anglicanism. He was partly following in the footsteps of his father, whose political interests led him to write Christianity and social advance in 1894. Conrad Noel spent time working with Father Robert Dolling in the slums of Portsmouth, but his particular brand of Anglican Socialism won him no friends and he was initially refused ordination by the Bishop of Exeter, so setting back his career (Bellamy & Saville, Dictionary of Labour Biography, ii, pp.276-7; Dyson, Paragon Review, p.11).

In 1894 Conrad Noel married Miriam Greenwood and was shortly afterward appointed curate to the vicar of Floweryfield in Cheshire where he gave Sunday lectures on socialism. He and his new wife joined the church socialist group called the Guild of St Matthew founded by Stewart Headlam in 1877. He was again refused ordination, this time by the Bishop of Chester, and was forced to resign his curacy. Until 1897 he and his family of wife and baby daughter, lived in near-poverty until a relative intervened and secured for him a curacy at Salford under Canon Hicks. He had continued his public speaking and joined the Social Democratic Federation, but was finally ordained in 1898 and in 1899 became assistant priest to the vicar of St Philip's in Newcastle (Bellamy & Saville, Dictionary of Labour Biography, ii, pp.277-8; Dyson, Paragon Review, p.12).

In Newcastle, Noel was in good company: Moll was an Anglo-catholic socialist, as was another assistant priest, Percy Widdrington, and after two years Noel moved to London and joined A L Lilley, another Anglo-catholic with socialist sympathies, at Paddington Green in London. Here Noel worked again with the poor of the slums and he also served as honorary secretary of the Guild of St Matthew between 1903 and 1904. In late 1904 he became assistant priest to Percy Dearmer at Primrose Hill who was known for his revitalisation of catholic church ritual. In 1906 Noel, Widdrington, Moll and several others formed the Church Socialist League, which was overtly committed to the Labour Party and Noel published The Labour Party: what it is and what it wants. In 1907 he devoted himself for three years full-time to the work of the League, becoming its organising secretary and giving speeches, writing reviews and articles and producing Socialism and church tradition (1909), Socialism in

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church history (1910) and *Byways of belief* (1912) (Bellamy & Saville, *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, ii, pp.278-9; Dyson, *Paragon Review*, p.12).

In 1910 Noel finally got a living through the private patronage of Lady Warwick. Lady Warwick held the manor of Easton and the advowson of five churches including Thaxted where the Noel family settled for the next 35 years. His early years at Thaxted were characterised by energetic vicarial work in line with his ideas. He abolished separation of the choir from the congregation and upgraded church wallhangings and vestments. Noel ran evening lectures during which he engaged in debate with local nonconformist ministers and he organised a 'People's Procession' through the village; his wife ran country dancing classes and he revived the local tradition of plain song. Inevitably he created controversy and his activities were not well-received by all in the village. Crypto-popish shrines drove away the Church of England purists and the abolition of reserved pews drove away the churchwarden (Bellamy & Saville, *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, ii, pp.280-1; Dyson, *Paragon Review*, p.12).

Noel continued to be involved in the Church Socialist League until 1918 when he left to form the Catholic Crusade, a move which reflected his growing belief that only catholic theology (rather than the Church of England per se) could be married successfully with economic socialism. This led to deteriorating relations with his bishop. He served for a while on the executive of the newly-formed British Socialist Party (formerly the Social Democratic Federation) and began making speeches in support of the Russian Revolution and Irish home rule. Thaxted church sported the Red Flag and the tricolour of Sinn Fein and these led to local demonstrations in 1919, a vast student demonstration in 1921 and finally, on Empire Day 1922, another large protest during which Thaxted was invaded by crowds parading the Union Jack. On 8 July 1922 Noel was officially asked by the Chancellor of the Diocese of Chelmsford to remove the offending flags from the church. The 'battle of the flags' marked the highpoint both of Noel's career as radical churchman and his impact on the local community. His Catholic Crusade, which had as one of its devotions 'The Red Mass', never had many followers and Noel's health and energy diminished with the progress of his diabetic medical condition (Bellamy & Saville, *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, ii, pp.282-5; Dyson, *Paragon Review*, p.13).

Diabetes led to blindness in 1935 and the Catholic Crusade was brought to an end a year later. However, Thaxted remained a centre for Christian socialism and Noel continued to lend his support to various causes including protests against unemployment and campaigns against Italian and German fascism. He also continued to write and published *The life of Christ* in 1937. In the early 1940s he became ill with cancer and he died on 22 July 1942. His autobiography appeared posthumously in 1945. His daughter Barbara married Jack Putterill, who succeeded Noel at Thaxted.

Stanley George Evans (1912-1960) was the son of Sidney Evans. He was educated at Westminster City School, King's College London and the University of Leeds before attending the College of the Resurrection in Mirfield. Between 1935 and 1942 he had three assistant curacies at St Stephen, Shepherd's Bush, St Clement, Barnsbury and St Andrew, Plaistow. He became quickly disillusioned with the political persuasion of his colleagues remarking of one vicar: 'Seems unable to look at matter from Christian point of view. Somehow Stanley Baldwin gets in the way'. Despite this early attraction to Christian socialism, and a recommendation that he be turned down for the priesthood, Evans was then ordained. However, his early career, not unsurprisingly, was not vastly successful and he spent the years between 1942 and 1946 as assistant curate at St Stephen, Portland Town, as well as

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being chaplain to the RAF (Obit. The Times; Leech, 'Stanley Evans: back street pastor', pp.5-6; Who was who, pp.357-8).

The slow start to his career may also be attributed to his connections with the Communist Party (his membership is uncertain) and his communist and Stalinist sympathies were well known. In 1943 he published Churches in the USSR and in 1949 he reported the Colonel Mindszenty trial in the Daily Worker. He chaired the British Soviet Friendship Society and drew considerable criticism for a glowing memorial service he gave for Stalin in 1953. In 1955 he took a group of clergy to Moscow. However, by the 1950s Evans had joined the many communist intellectuals who moderated their opinions about the USSR and he published Russia Reviewed. It was at this time that he got his first parish, that of Holy Trinity, Dalston (Obit. The Times; Leech, 'Stanley Evans: back street pastor', pp.6-7; Who was who, pp.357-8).

Although there was initial opposition to Evans's appointment he became a popular vicar with parish life organised around the parish mass and parish meeting. He held services on the streets to 'take the church to the people', and in 1962 wrote 'The church in the back streets'. He remained committed to left wing secular politics running lectures on Christians, race and racism in Dalston and becoming nationally involved in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. His one major text, 'The social hope of the Christian church' (1965) explored the social content of the teaching of Christ in historical context, from the time of the Roman Empire to the twentieth century (Obit. The Times; Leech, 'Stanley Evans: back street pastor', pp.6-7; Who was who, pp.357-8).

Through the first part of the 1960s Evans's career was controversial but successful. In 1960 he was appointed by the Bishop of Southwark as canon residentiary to Southwark Cathedral and he became a key figure in 'South Bank religion' involved in debates about 'the new theology'. In 1962 he gave the first R H Tawney memorial lecture on 'Equality'. He was at the height of his career when he was killed in a car crash while returning from an anti-nuclear demonstration. In 1939 he had married Anastasia Nicholson and at the time of his tragic death he left behind his wife and two daughters (Obit. The Times; Leech, 'Stanley Evans: back street pastor', pp.6-7; Who was who, pp.357-8).

Custodial history:

Presented by Father Kenneth Leech, London, 23 October 1993

Description:

Copy of Conrad Noel's marriage certificate to Miriam Greenwood and an interview with Canon Stanley Evans about church music and liturgy

Extent: 2 items

Related material:

Papers of Rev. Conrad Noel [U DNO]
Papers of Canon Stanley Evans [U DEV]

Access conditions:

Access will be granted to any accredited reader

A copy of the audiotape recording (U DX264/2) has been transferred to CD for users to listen to.

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U DX264/1 Photocopy. Marriage certificate of Conrad Noel and Miriam Greenwood
From certified copy made 4 Nov 1945)
1 item 17 Sep 1895

U DX264/2 Audiotape. Canon Stanley Evans, interviewed for an unidentified radio programme.
Audiotape. Canon Stanley Evans, interviewed for an unidentified radio programme. Church music and liturgy; the church and the community, and other theological issues. Duration: c. 30 minutes.
1 item [1962-1963]

A copy of the recording has been transferred to CD for users to listen to.