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Philander and Me

by

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Any visitor to the fourth floor reading room of the Newberry Library is welcome to call up a long-forgotten commentary on the four gospels, published in 1818 in a second edition, written by the equally forgotten Heneage Elsley (1745 or 46-1833). The book arrives at your desk carefully cushioned on its protective pillow, a rather plush setting for such a modest, beat-up looking object. But if you gently open the book to the front endpaper, what you will find immediately justifies the care the Newberry has taken to preserve it. There are three bookplates. One, so recent that it is not yet affixed to the board, is a Newberry plate, bearing the legend "Gift of Bexley Seabury Seminary." Above it are two other plates, both dating at least to the early nineteenth century: one refers to Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, and the other to the Theological College of the Diocese of Ohio. But that's not all. At the top of the page, you can just make out a faded signature and a date: "Hannah More, 1827."

As any Newberry librarian can tell you, tracing an old book's provenance can lead you to some unusual places. Often the content of the book and the name of its author are much less important than the history of the book itself. For reasons I

hope to explain, that faded inscription on that yellowed front endpaper provides a whiff of the agitation that abolished the British slave trade, a campaign associated with names like William Wilberforce, John Newton, Lords Kenyon, Bexley, and Gambier, and Hannah More herself (1745-1833). What's more, if you dig deeper, you are just a few degrees of separation from the American statesman Henry Clay of Kentucky, the Great Compromiser and the Western Star, negotiator of the treaty of Ghent ending the way War of 1812, the Senator who would famously rather be right than be President. And you are within even fewer degrees of separation from Clay's equally righteous and stubborn ecclesiastical counterpart—Philander Chase (1775-1852), pioneer Episcopal bishop in the Ohio wilderness, the first Episcopal bishop in Chicago, and uncle of Salmon Chase, member of Lincoln's "Team of Rivals," and justice of the post-Civil War Supreme Court.

This mingled yarn begins in rural New Hampshire, during the years following the end of the American Revolution, which I have now begun to think of as the first American civil war. To the surprise of his old New England family, while he was a student at Dartmouth, Philander Chase presented himself for confirmation in the Episcopal Church—the American offshoot of the Church of England. Dartmouth in those days was hardly a hotbed of Episcopalianism. The Episcopal Church was a struggling denomination in post-revolutionary America. Still tainted by its Tory roots in the Church of England, it tended to present itself as a respectable bastion built against the vulgar religious enthusiasm that was sweeping the new country in the Second Great Awakening. But Philander Chase had little regard for institutional

bastions. Someone who knew him all too well could still describe Chase vividly years after his death, at a commemorative service held in Hartford, Connecticut in 1879:

“As there was very little of commonplace in the life of Bishop Chase, so there were no neutral tints in his character; the lines were sharply drawn and the coloring deep and strong. Right or wrong, he was not to be easily diverted from his course, and his own strong conviction that he was sure to be right was one of the secrets of his power. He was never ashamed of his divine Master, and did not seem to know what the fear of man meant.” (Smith 1903: 99)

Fired up by the Gospel, personally ambitious, physically imposing, and both stubborn and cantankerous when crossed, within a few short years of his ordination in 1807, the Rev. Mr. Chase was to cut a wide swath through the Burnt Over District in central and western New York State, that early nineteenth-century hotbed of evangelical fervor and tumultuous religious invention. Chase founded Episcopal congregations and schools in towns and settlements across the Mohawk and Genesee valleys. But as restless as the new country itself, Chase moved relentlessly westward, aiming for the unsettled wilderness of Ohio and the Western Reserve. Before making his mark in Ohio, he first moved southward, down the Mississippi River all the way to New Orleans, where he struggled to establish an Episcopal beachhead in that overwhelmingly Roman Catholic, cosmopolitan, and slave-trading entrepôt. Chase did not stay long in New Orleans, but two events during this brief

sojourn would shadow his career for decades. His enemies would twist the details of the first episode in an effort to blacken his reputation. But the other episode, recalled years later, would win the admiration of Hannah More and her abolitionist colleagues, and lead to the settling of the tiny village of Gambier, to the founding of Bexley Hall Seminary and Kenyon College in the heart of the new village, and ultimately to the gift of the remarkable collection of books that now resides uptown at the Newberry, including the book donated and inscribed by Hannah More herself.

Chase tells the story this way:

“Two gentlemen, friendly to the writer, by the name of Leonard, the one a druggist, and the other a commission merchant, lived in New Orleans. The former came one morning from town and said that his brother, having received the consignment of a large cargo of negros just from the slave coast in Africa, felt it was his duty to take the best care of them in his power, now the business was thrown, much against his will or expectations, into his hands. Some of them, however, he said, were already in a perishing state, and two of them must die if not immediately removed from the rest and carefully nursed. His object in coming to us was to ask the human favor of letting them come into our kitchen. The proposal was immediately assented to, and one end of the servants’ house became a hospital. By the assiduous and kind nursing afforded through the writer’s family, one of those poor fellow-beings was saved from death, but the other, after lingering long, died. A coffin was made for him by the hired servant, Jim,—a grave was dug at the lower part of an oblong lot of several acres, and the

family saw him decently interred, thinking that his soul was as precious in the eyes of his and our great Creator as that of anyone else.”

The second episode reflects less well than the first on the character of the young Mr. Chase, who discovered to his chagrin the compromises required of white northerner in a slave-trading city and a slave-owning state.

In that earlier account, Chase mentions that a hired servant named Jim had helped to bury the unfortunate African, whose early death saved him from a life of enslaved misery. It's not likely that Jim lasted long in Chase's service following that funeral. Hired servants, Chase explains, were hard to find in New Orleans, and even harder to keep. So Chase did what everyone else in his social class did in New Orleans in 1807. He purchased a slave of his own, with \$500 of borrowed money. Years later, in his autobiography, he is still trying to justify his action: *“Where all are owners of slaves, no man can keep house without them. He must own them himself, or hire those belonging to others. The latter expedient was tried by the writer, both from inclination and for the want of means to purchase, but it was found impractical. No one would hire out good servants; and those of a different character were not worth having. To borrow money and to purchase was the only way left, except to give up and quit the country. (Chase 1848: I, 74)*

On the recommendation of a Dr. Robert Dow, a Scotsman who was a churchwarden in Chase's New Orleans congregation, Chase purchased Jack, a

nineteen year old African from Baltimore: “[His] *master*, Chase writes, *had met with misfortunes, and was unable to keep him in decent clothes, (for he was very poorly clad;) but...would serve [Chase] faithfully and be grateful for a decent and quiet home, to which...he had been accustomed.* (Chase 1848: I, 75). Unfortunately for Chase and his borrowed investment, after just three months in Chase’s possession Jack escaped from bondage, “*shipped himself on board the Thomas Jefferson, just ready to sail to Liverpool...,and the writer never saw him more.*”

Chase writes in retrospect: “*The writer at that time thought it peculiarly misfortunate, hard pressed as he was, on all hands, for means to get on, and do his duty in that expensive place, to be so deceived by a slave. Little did he think how mature reflection on the evils of slavery would heal the wound; and above all, how this event, insignificant in itself, might, in his subsequent life, raise him from deep distress, and be the means, in the hand of God, of greatly benefitting his Church, in founding an important institution of religion and learning.*” (Chase 1848: I, 75).

That mature reflection bore fruit years later, when Chase was informed by his friend in New Orleans that for reasons yet unexplained Jack had returned to New Orleans, been captured and imprisoned, and could now be returned to Chase as Jack’s original owner. Chase instead insisted that Jack be given his freedom, an act that would have obviously positive consequences for Jack, but as we shall see, eventually also for Chase himself.

But this gets a bit ahead of our story.

Not long after Jim's escape to freedom in England, Chase abandoned his life in New Orleans, forging northward again, often at great physical risk and personal cost, and made his final return into what was then the Ohio wilderness. He settled in what is now the central part of the state, buying farmland, building a house, and establishing a church in Worthington, near present-day Columbus. Personally impoverished, newly widowed, and in partnership with just a handful of clergy and lay leaders, Chase was determined to build an Episcopal presence in the Ohio territory: to found a pioneer diocese whose success would mirror the progress of the country's westward movement, and perhaps counter the influence of the eastern Episcopal establishment, centered in Trinity Church Wall Street and the diocese of New York.

Given the meager resources at hand in central Ohio, such success was unlikely. In Chase's day, Trinity Parish in lower Manhattan was the epicenter of Episcopal revival in the east. It was also by far the most extensive property holder in the rapidly expanding city, and was run with a firm hand by Chase's soon-to-be nemesis, Bishop John Henry Hobart. Like Chase, Hobart had been a founder of parishes and schools, many located in the same uncharted upstate New York territories where Chase had once operated. Hobart was also instrumental in founding the General Theological Seminary in New York, which he was determined would function as its name implies: as the one and only Episcopal seminary in the country, a truly

general seminary.

By 1818, Chase and his few scattered clergy had managed to form a new church jurisdiction, the Episcopal Diocese of Ohio, which then elected Chase as their first bishop. Soon thereafter Chase resolved to set up a seminary of his own, convinced that sending clergy candidates to Hobart's General Seminary in New York would guarantee that they would be seduced by the considerable attractions of city life, and refuse to return to hard-scrabble Ohio. Chase's plan, if successful, might pose a genuine threat to New York's and Hobart's cultural and ecclesiastical hegemony. At least that's how Hobart saw it. Conflict was inevitable.

As is still the case today, locally elected Episcopal bishops could not be consecrated without the support of the majority of the governing committees in the already existing dioceses. Immediately following his election, Chase traveled under dreadful conditions from Worthington across Pennsylvania to attend the annual meeting of Episcopal bishops in Philadelphia, only to find that approval of his election had been blocked by rumors about his moral unfitness for office. Unbeknownst to Chase, charges had been lodged by the Rev. John Churchill Rudd, an intimate friend of Bishop Hobart. Rudd himself had visited Ohio in 1817, where it appears that he had interest "as it regards the formation of the Ohio Convention." (Smythe 1931: 73). More to the point, Rudd had been Chase's next-door neighbor in New Orleans, and knew first-hand that Chase had harbored and nursed two African captives. Perhaps out of jealousy of Chase's Ohio success, Rudd twisted the story to

make it look as if Chase had richly profited from speculation in the slave trade. “It has been...stated to me,” Rudd claimed, “that he dealt largely in slaves, not purchasing for himself, but upon a speculation, & that he actually made money in that traffic” (Smythe 1931: 82).

No doubt unwilling to soil themselves in that moral morass (from which, ironically, several prosperous lay supporters of the Episcopal Church would turn a handsome profit from their own speculation in the slave trade), several key northern bishops pressured Chase to withdraw his candidacy, without so much as a hearing. Chase stubbornly refused, insisting on an open airing of the charges, tartly observing that every diocese in which he had served as a priest had nonetheless endorsed his consecration. In the event, Chase was completely exonerated. But the stigma lingered. Even eighty years later, his family remained bitter about what they viewed as a wanton act of ecclesiastical character assassination. It was an “inexplicable,” “malicious,” “almost diabolical event,” writes Chase’s granddaughter in 1903, “which cannot now be accounted for, except by the agency of some evil spirit from the netherworld. It is difficult to imagine a man or men bad enough to give harbor to such evil thoughts against an innocent man whose life and work distinctly give the lie to the infamous story.” (Smith 1903: 134).

It is not clear how active Bishop Hobart had been in supporting his friend Rudd in making the accusation against Chase. But Chase’s subsequent decision to raise funds for his proposed Ohio seminary galvanized Hobart into action. Hobart

vehemently opposed Chase's intention to found an upstart Episcopal seminary in the savage precincts of the Ohio territory, one that might compete with and even overshadow Hobart's own institution in New York. So when Chase, stymied by his inability to raise funds from the east coast establishment, decided to set sail for England to present his case to church supporters there, Hobart acted quickly. Prior to Chase's arrival in Bristol, Hobart made sure that the powerful church press in England ran stories questioning Chase's motives and integrity, implying that his plan to create a rival seminary was an act of schism. To make matters more sure, Hobart himself set sail for England, arriving several days before Chase, then shadowing him at every step, and writing scathing letters in advance to any British dignitary to whom Chase might make appeal. Hobart's goal was to ensure that the British press would echo every possible rumor about Chase's character, including the old canard that Chase had personally profited from the slave trade.

For the first several months of his time in England, Chase thus found himself a marked man in British church circles—at best ignored, at worst publically snubbed. But prior to his departure from Ohio, he had obtained from a mutual friend a powerful letter of introduction from Henry Clay, former speaker of the House of Representatives, addressed to Nicholas Van Sittart, the first Baron Bexley, , one of the longest-serving Chancellors of the Exchequer in British history, and an ardent Church of England evangelical (1766-1851). Lord Bexley had befriended Clay during the negotiations in Ghent that brought an end to the War of 1812. He was sympathetic to the struggling movement to end the slave trade in England, and

served as vice-president of the American Colonization Society, whose aim was to return African American freedmen to their original homeland. On the strength of the Clay letter, Chase managed to trump Hobart's machinations and arrange a meeting with a reluctant Lord Bexley—he had also heard the rumors about Chase, and was wary. But Chase's eloquence, sincerity, and sheer force of personality persuaded Bexley of his good intentions. It was the breakthrough that Chase had prayed for. Bexley pledged his support for the seminary that Chase would soon name in his honor.

Around that same time, Robert Dow, Chase's old friend from New Orleans, had returned to his native Scotland. By happenstance, Dow approached another supporter of Wilberforce, Joseph Butterworth, an influential member of Parliament and a fervent Methodist, for investment advice. Butterworth knew of the conflicting reports about Chase. He had seen the newspaper accounts and heard the rumors from "another American prelate"—no doubt Hobart—that Chase was a trouble-making schismatic. Learning somehow that Dow was acquainted with Chase in his early years, he asked his new friend about Chase's "real character." In his autobiography, Chase proudly reconstructs Dow and Butterworth's conversation:

Mr. B. [Alluding to the rumors about Chase]: "But there must be something singular in this sentiment, or he would not be voluntarily in the situation in which the British public now regard him."

Dr. D. "Singular! I never knew anything singular in him but his emancipating

his yellow slave; and that, I would suppose, would not injure him here in England, though we in New Orleans thought it foolish as well as singular."

Chase then comments: "Here the doctor told the story of the yellow slave Jack... This story caused a great alteration in Mr. Butterworth's mind, insomuch that he took the writer's part, invited him to his house, introduced him to his friends, and solicited the favor of the company of great and good men to meet him at his table. " (Chase 1848: I, 331-332)

One of those solicited friends was a great and good woman. Hannah More was a poet, dramatist, philanthropist, and in her early heyday, a respected member of the London artistic and intellectual circles that included the Shakespearean actor David Garrick; the Royal Academy painter Joshua Reynolds; and Samuel Johnson, poet, critic, lexicographer, sage of coffee house culture, and subject of James Boswell's great biography. In her later life, More had become a devout evangelical, a member of the so-called Clapham Sect associated with men like Wilberforce, and so also an ardent public supporter of the abolitionist cause.

Flush with his success with Lord Bexley and the evangelical elite in Britain, and shortly before his return to Ohio, Chase paid a visit to the now elderly More at her estate near Bristol. It was then that he likely received, perhaps in recognition of his generosity in liberating Jack, and from her own hand, the volume inscribed with her signature that now resides in the Newberry Library. Chase could add this volume to

the dozens of other books, donated by More and her friends, to be shipped to Ohio from Bristol—the collection that would form the core the library at his new institution. In the Newberry volume, you will find inserted a handwritten note, perhaps from Hannah More herself, with the following message: “This is one of a number of books presented to Bishop Chase by friends in England as a beginning of a library for this College.”

And so we have come full circle, to Hannah More’s signature in an obscure biblical commentary, and to the succession of bookplates affixed to its inside front cover. The bibliographic treasure trove that More helped Chase assemble in 1827 has its own colorful 190-year history: the first few dozen volumes gathered from the libraries of the English gentry, from people like Hannah More and Lords Bexley, Kenyon, and Gambier; then shipped to Ohio to fill the shelves at Kenyon College and Bexley Hall Seminary in the tiny town of Gambier, where over the next century or so the collection increased in size to total over 2000 rare items; then shipped from Gambier to Colgate-Rochester-Crozer Seminary in Rochester, N.Y., after Bexley Hall broke away from Kenyon College in 1968; then, twenty years later, shipped from Rochester to Trinity Lutheran Seminary in a suburb of Columbus, coincidentally called Bexley, after the Bexley Hall faculty abandoned Colgate-Rochester and decided to return to the once-virgin territory where Chase started it all. There the collection languished untouched for nineteen years, crated up and inaccessible in a basement storeroom.

But that is another story, perhaps for another time.

Five years ago, Bexley Hall merged with Seabury-Western Seminary in Chicago, and moved its entire operation from Columbus to 60th Street in Hyde Park. The books have now been rescued from their basement storage, shipped from Columbus to their permanent home at the Newberry, thanks to the foresight and generosity of the newly formed board of trustees of Bexley Seabury Seminary, whose name is now proudly affixed—or soon to be affixed—to the inside front cover of Hannah More’s old book.

You will find it at case number BS2548.E57 1812. I invite you to visit the Newberry, and to see it for yourself.

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