William Winwood Reade: Martyrdom and Morality

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66 TY JE are now in the dreary desert which separates two ages of belief. A new era is at hand."1 Thus William Winwood Reade described the religious-intellectual watershed of the 1870's in England. He was writing in his The Martyrdom of Man, which was published in 1872, and went through four editions in as many years. The book receives a mention in several bibliographies as one of the "most important books" to be published in 1872,2 but apart from that, and passing references to it in literary histories of the period, it has evaded notice in its own right. It is something of an odd-man-out in the middle of a spate of agnostic, rationalistic and atheistic literature which the press churned out in that decade. As Reade sensed, there was indeed a decisive shift in opinion during those years, which could well be termed "the secularization of public consciousness." Christian assumptions were well-nigh eclipsed in the periodical press at least, and unbelief was at last socially acceptable.

The ferment of belief and unbelief was not limited, however, to one group of intellectuals, or to one social class. It was a feature of Victorian life that permeated every area of society. But the different strands of doubt, unbelief, or atheism can be unravelled fairly successfully, and shown to be distinctive. Often an individual master was acknowledged (Comte, Darwin, Paine, or Holyoake for example) or else the influence of a whole new outlook, in "history," "science," or "biblical criticism." While "overlapping" is clearly inevitable as well, in most of

the literary landmarks of the decade there is a certain selectivity of sources, and a self-consciousness of intellectual background or social class. Bradlaugh, for example, wanted his ideas to be accepted as "respectable" ones, while Tyndall, the "popular" anti-Christian scientist, cared little for "respectability." Each, in his way, was reflecting his class aspirations or academic standing, and the value each placed on them. Reade, however, eludes categories like this, and seems to straddle across the clearer boundaries of class and type. A look at his work may suggest reasons for this, and help place him in the context of the Victorian religious ferment.

Snippets of The Martyrdom of Man are quoted in various texts on the period, and the book is included in lists of polemical works thought to be typical of the troubled climate. But, as we have suggested, the contemporary popularity which it had, and its very enigmatic quality, mark it out for attention which it has not previously been accorded. It contains many diverse threads of argument, producing something which is at once contradictory, and yet curiously powerful. Although for many it was to become a kind of "secular Bible," the histrionic review it first received from the Saturday Review is worth quoting: "The book is wild, mischievious, and we should hardly be wrong if we added blasphemous."4 There was indeed huge animosity against the book, and this, of course, may have contributed to its sales. Michael Foot has suggested that its popularity was due to "the sinuous force of his argument,"5 while J. M. Robertson contends that the secret lay in its "accessibility to the plain man."6 It is doubtful whether either of these reasons is a satisfactory explanation. Rather, one might argue, it was the contradictory nature of the book which gave it notoriety, a wide circulation, and conspicuous attention. suggesting that no one quite knew how to take it, simply because it was capable of so many different interpretations. To understand this, we must look closely at the book itself, and the life of Winwood Reade.

William Winwood Reade was a great individualist, in the best Victorian tradition. He was born into a family of well-heeled landowners with East Indian Company connections at Murrayfield, near Crieff (Scotland) on Boxing Day 1838. At the age of eighteen he found himself at (the then) Magdalen Hall, Oxford University. He left there three years later without a degree. Casting around for a likely occupation, he discovered that his uncle, Charles Reade, was not only achieving considerable fame as a novelist, but also living comfortably from the proceeds, so he decided to follow in his footsteps, and write.

His first effort, which appeared in 1859, bore the title Charlotte and Myra: a puzzle in six bits. The Athenaeum noticed its appearance by conceding that "The foolish tale is written with a certain dash and spirit."7 It would. in any case, have had to be outstanding to compete with the number of "classics" which were printed in that year.8 Unfortunately his second production, even though he conformed to the "three-decker" convention this time, met with rather harsher comments. Entitled Liberty Hall, Oxon, it was a (probably autobiographical) tale of "dissipation and sloth" at university. Its "spurious description" was "regretted" by the Athenaeum, but the censure he received from the Saturday Review roused him to write an angry reply to the London Critic.9 In the final part of Liberty Hall, Oxon, there is a description of an initiation into freemasonry, which may have led to the idea for his next book, The veil of Isis. This was mainly a history of the Druids, and was faintly anti-clerical in thrust — a hint of things to come. In one passage he attacks priesthood in the High Church party with vituperation: ". . . false vipers who, warmed and cherished in the bosom of this gentle church [of England], use their increasing strength in darting black poison through

all her veins." Not surprisingly, the press was no kinder to this third work.

Not many escaped the excitement caused by the publication of The Origin of Species in 1859, and one feature of this excitement was the renewed zest with which "voyages of exploration and discovery" were undertaken. Reade's own interest was aroused by a London exhibition of stuffed gorillas, brought back from the Gaboon (now Gabon) by a Frenchman, Paul du Chaillu. Controversy had begun when Du Chaillu claimed that this new discovery was an anthropoid ape of great ferocity and intelligence. However, these were speculations, and had no scientific evidence to support them, so the ideas were quickly ridiculed by zoologists. But Reade's imagination was at once fired. Fame was still persistently eluding him, and he knew how voyages such as Darwin's on the Beagle, and Huxley's on the Rattlesnake had been the real starting point of their careers, so he resolved to follow this new trail. He would go to the Gaboon and settle the gorilla controversy for himself, and return in a blaze of glory. He sailed for West Africa in December 1862.10

He did return, a year later, a little the worse for wear, (due to "fevers and intemperance") to find that there was not much interest in his report at all. No one seemed to want to know that Du Chaillu had never seen a live gorilla, and that his theories were no more than "native" accounts which had been written up by a New York reporter. During his absence, evidently, interest in the case had been eclipsed by other news. He wrote up his own findings in Savage Africa, which did, at last, bring a few favourable comments. He had, however, discovered one thing during his travels, and that was that he was very ignorant, both of the history and geography of Africa, and of medicine. He therefore enrolled at St. Mary's Hospital as a medical student, and devoted himself to wide general study. A grant from the Royal Geo-

graphical Society enabled him to return to Africa in 1868, where he explored further up the Niger than any other European had previously done, and also opened up several new trade routes. He complained, when writing up the reports of these travels (in African Sketch Book) that his discoveries had not excited "the slightest interest among English geographers." However, as Legge rightly points out, "this is hardly to be wondered at. Reade seems to have studiously avoided the taking of observations, and left behind him on starting from Freetown the sextant and artificial horizon lent to him by the Geographical Society for that purpose." The last visit to Africa was in 1873, when he went as the Times reporter on the Ashanti War, but that was not until after he had written and published The Martyrdom of Man.

His studies had given him a desire to write a history of Africa, and indeed, he had acquired a considerable knowledge of the country by the time of his second visit. Having been exposed to the country, moreover, he had become very sensitive to a number of issues affecting the African people. Although he himself had no doubt fostered the growth of colonial exploitation (by opening new trade routes), he also observed with horror the Portuguese slave trade. He concluded that the arrival of Western religion and commerce had not, on the whole, been beneficial to Africa. He maintained that the "Mohammedans" were no less than "practical Christians,"12 and very much regretted the intrusion of British missionaries. So the "history of Africa" acquired the distinctive complexion that was to give its author the long-coveted recognition he had sought. And by this stage, notoriety was as good as fame.

At face value, *The Martyrdom of Man* is a history of Africa expanded into a history of the world. In the preface Reade explains, "I could not describe the Negroland of ancient times without describing Egypt and Carthage. From Egypt I was drawn to Asia and to

Reade's style of writing was aggressively "evolutionary," and contemporary ideas of "history as development" were fully used. He freely acknowledged his debt to a number of writers and thinkers, and there is certainly much evidence of the thinking of Darwin, Comte, and Spencer in the book. Whole passages bear the traces of these individual mentors, as if he had just put one of their books down in order to write another chapter of his own, but this feature, if anything, adds rather than detracts from the overall impact of the book.

The very nature of the work as a history of Africa gave it a certain prestige and readership value, as Africa was a very popular topic of current interest. The same edition of the Saturday Review, for example, which carried a review of The Martyrdom of Man also had an interview with Stanley, entitled "How I met Livingstone." Here again, however, there was a newness of approach, which was an explicit rejection of the ethnocentric approach characteristic of most writing of the period. In fact, the rude assault on European conceit probably did little to endear him to the Empire-lovers. Righting the imbalances of previous historical writing included assertions like "Asia taught Europe its alphabet." Regardless of the veracity of that particular statement, it was contrary to the Europe-centred attitude prevalent.

Not content with conventional backward-looking history, Reade also tried his hand (with exceptional success, seen retrospectively) at projections of the future. He predicted that there would be "a motive force which will take the place of steam . . . arial locomotion . . . which by annihilating distance will speedily extinguish national distinctions, . . . and the manufacture of flesh and flour from the elements by a chemical process." Prophesies of future inventions are of perennial interest, but they were especially popular with the Victorians, because of their incorrigible belief in the god of science, who seemed to have endless wonders to perform.

Beatrice Webb, in My Apprenticeship, cites only one example of the cult of science of the mid-Victorian period, but she suggests that it is typical. There were, she maintains, two outstanding tenets of thought and feeling in the period, those being "the current belief in the scientific method, in that intellectual synthesis of observation and experiment, hypothesis and verification, by means of which alone all mundane problems were to be solved . . . and the consciousness of a new motive: the transference of the emotion of self-sacrificing service from God to man."15 Her lengthy quotation is from The Martyrdom of Man, which, she noted, "on account of the broad culture and passionate sincerity with which the author identifies science with the intellect of man, has become a classic, and which foreshadows a universe over which the human intellect will reign as the creator and moulder of all things, whether in earth or heaven."

Reade was stating, in very bald terms, something which was only implicit or veiled in the writings of others, that science would soon replace religion, and that this was a necessary stage in the progressive development of mankind. John Tyndall was to cause a similar furore in 1874 with his provocative address before the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Belfast, and all through the decade it was this contraposition of "Science and Religion" which engaged the public mind. This was the sting in the tail of the science-god. As the Saturday Review saw it, it was "really too soon to

take for granted that science and religion are opposed. To assume their opposition, and to put it forward in such a tone as Mr. Reade does can only do harm to science. It is far wiser for scientific men to work out their own conclusions without bringing in the question of whether those conclusions agree or not with revealed religion or with its received interpretation (See n. 4).

After the bitter, and maybe premature squabbles of the 1860's, (typified by the clash between Huxley and Bishop Wilberforce at the Oxford meeting of the British Association) there was a spirit, at least among one group of intellectuals, of tolerance and desire for a rapprochement. The career of the Metaphysical Society, for example, was a model of mutual consideration and respect for others; civilized gentlemen agreeing to differ.16 It was Reade's departure from this norm which riled his reviewers, who wrote that "he has a right to hold his opinions, but . . . we have to demand that the ordinary decencies of controversy be observed."17 Why did he not conform to these "decencies"? Was he just a bungler, who in his thirst for popular attention took a gratuitously aggressive stance, and thus spoiled his chances of making a respectable name for himself? It is doubtful whether this was the case, as there were other aspects of the work which throw light on another explanation.

One feature of *The Martyrdom of Man* which might not have struck its early readers in the way it does is the pervasive notion of perfectibility. Modern critics have commented on this facet of Reade's work more than any other. The most important passage occurs near the end of the book, and utopian ecstasy overcomes him as he gushes: "none rich and none poor . . . peaceful government . . . united world . . . disease extirpated . . . men will make worlds . . . as masters of nature . . . Man will then be perfect." It is difficult to understand, in our cynical and myopic generation, how anyone could

seriously affirm such a creed, but in the 1870's the situation was reversed; the pessimists were a small minority.

One commentator, John Passmore, takes particular note of Reade's "secular Zoroastrianism," which he regards as an unusually explicit version of a faith which sustained everyday Victorian perfectibilism. In this, the key concept was of History as a great drama in which the forces of progress fight against, and destroy the forces of reaction. Progress has the Science-god on its side, and religion, of course, is the main "force of reaction."20 When Reade exclaimed "Our faith is the perfectibility of man"21 he was also making clear reference to the secular religions of humanity (such as that of Comte) which proliferated in those years. In the closing chapter, he described his own version as "The Religion of Reason and Love." The Athenaeum, however, gave this pretty short shrift: it is "a thoroughly worthless book, needlessly profane and indecent into the bargain . . . it has a vulgarity about it which would at once frighten any schoolboy off who might otherwise be in danger of falling a convert to the Religion on Reason and Love."22

The fact that Reade was from a well-to-do family, that he had been to university, and that he had attempted to do some scientific work himself, hoping to follow Darwin himself should have found him a niche in the "respectable agnosticism" of the 1870's, the agnosticism of Leslie Stephen and of John Morley. Instead of that, however, within a few years of the publication of The Martyrdom of Man, his name was linked with the secularism of the artisan class, whose leader was Holyoake, and whose journals were the Freethinker and the National Reformer. It is quite plausible to think that different people bought The Martyrdom of Man for different reasons. A working class secularist might have bought it for its "atheism," (while maybe disagreeing with its politics), and a middleclass agnostic gentleman for its novel history (while maybe regretting its bellicose anti-Christian position). But to anyone who called himself a "Christian," either by theology or "virtue," it was unspeakably offensive. Prior to publication, various friends advised Reade not to include the anti-theistic sections, in view of the indignation that would inevitably be aroused. He remained obdurate: "In the matter of religion I listen to no remonstrance . . . my conscience is my advisor, and if my religious opinions are condemned, it will not make me regret having expressed them." To retract his crucial passages would, of course, have made a mockery of the title of the book, and he was unlikely to withdraw at that stage.

His sweeping condemnations of religion, and particularly of Bible characters, read very like the brash atheism of the Freethinker. It was not the considered pronouncement of the scholarly critic, but the iconoclasm of a daredevil. He was outspoken, and before his time, when he wrote: "A god's moral disposition, his ideas of right and wrong, are those of the people by whom he is created." Thus Jehovah, who according to him had been invented by the "wild Bedouin" Abraham, was himself "an invisible Bedouin chief who travelled with them in a tent, who walked about the camp at night and wanted it kept clean, who manoeuvred the troops in battle, who delighted in massacres and human sacrifices, who murdered people in sudden fits of rage, who changed his mind, who enjoyed petty larceny and employed angels to tell lies, who, in short, possessed all the vices of the Arab character."24

Jesus, too, was dismissed as a sincere character, a "dervish" who disliked the learned and the rich, but who was deluded. "The current fancies regarding the approaching destruction of the world, and the conquest of the evil power, and the reign of God, had fermented his mind, and had made him the subject of a remarkable hallucination. He believed that he was the promised Messiah."²⁵ The style, in all his writing about the Bible and its characters, was decidedly secularistic. It is significant that the apparently naive judgments about science

were hardly mentioned by his critics. The controversy was, in fact, a moral one. It seemed, as the freethinkers looked into the Bible, and maybe more as they observed the church around, that the whole of organized religion was immoral. Could a just God condemn a man to hell? Or should an urban clergyman earn far more than, and live in luxury compared with his factory-working parishioners? To them, the ontological and cosmological musings of the Metaphysical Society were irrelevant, not only because they might not have understood them, but because it seemed that the whole Christian system was inhuman, unjust, and indecent in the first place.

Reade, whether he was aware of it or not, was winning himself an audience very different from the one he might have had if the title had, after all, been *The Origin of Mind*, which is what he had originally intended to call it. From the rarified heights of the Religion of Reason and Love he wrenched certain scenes from their context and damned Christianity because "It teaches that the Creator of the universe . . . exhibited his back to Moses, ordered Hosea to commit adultery, and Ezekiel to eat dung. There is no need to say anything more. Such a religion is blasphemous and foul."²⁶

The ideological aspect, which we have already touched upon, was another contentious point for Reade. He argues in the first section on "War" that in ancient Egypt the inventors became the rulers, and who in order to protect their position gave themselves religious legitimation and formed armies. Imperialism, too, he argues, strengthened by religion was "a useful means of keeping the conquered people in subjection." Theology, he concluded, is a good nurse ("for infant civilization") but a bad mistress (for "grown-up minds"). The clergy were the implicit object of attack, even when he was describing Egypt. He bemoaned the Egyptian entangling of science and religion because of its consequence, which was that "Egypt stood still, and her theology turned her into stone."

Belief itself, for Reade, was immoral. He asked how anyone could believe in a "semi-human providence . . . a Deus Palevensis . . . a God created in the image of a watchmaker." The "universe is anonymous," he went on, "published under secondary laws." By the end of the book, of course, he was obliged to conclude that "Supernatural Christianity is false. God worship is idolatry. Prayer is useless. The soul is not immortal. There are no rewards and no punishments in a future Thus his book was turned into a compendium of anti-Christian opinion — a "bible." What others only said hesitatingly and partially, at that time, Reade wrote without compunction, and without omission. statements just quoted could have come from the pens of Cassells, Holyoake, Galton, Huxley, and Clifford respectively, but it took Reade to fuse their different ideas into a single anti-Christian blunderbuss.

Susan Budd has shown that the so-called loss of faith (it might be more accurately thought of as a discovery of new arguments to buttress traditional anti-clericalism) among the artisan and manual labouring classes was often attributable to these moral arguments rather than to the more intellectual struggles. Reade plainly made use of the stock of contemporary intellectual weapons in his assault on Christianity, but it could be argued that the novelty of The Martyrdom of Man lay in the comprehensiveness of its strategy against the old orthodoxy. If that is the case, moreover, then the vilifying greeting that he received is less surprising. He was really drawing on the armoury of the secularists, who used these moral arguments against Christianity. This is why the Saturday Review, for example, did not like it. They saw that "his main charge against Christianity is that its moral effect, is bad,"29

How then should we try to locate Winwood Reade and his *The Martyrdom of Man* in the intellectual and religious context of the 1870's? There is little doubt that his book

would have been hailed as a masterpiece of secularistic rhetoric had it not been for his rather Conservative political outlook and his death-bed repentance in 1875. At least, at a time when death-bed utterances were crucially important to secularists and anti-secularists alike,³⁰ the publication of *The Outcast* in 1875 would have sufficed as a final testament. For the hero of *The Outcast* dies modifying the atheism of *The Martyrdom of Man* into agnosticism: "I disbelieve in the future life, but I may be mistaken. It is impossible to *know*." For immortality to be a possible contingency to such an "enlightened" mind was a decidedly regressive admission.³¹

As already suggested, though, Reade's politics would have been his Achilles' heel as far as the secularists were concerned. He seemed to consider no system better than the British Constitution, the government, and the British way of life, and thought the revolutions in France to be mere absurdities. Yet as Budd points out, the secularists' critique of Christianity was more often concerned "with the churches' effect on political life as supporters of corrupt ruling groups and reactionary policies." In these two spheres, then, Reade would not have made himself immediately popular with secularism.

It is quite possible that Gladstone made an explicit reference to *The Martyrdom of Man* in a speech to the Liverpool College in December 1872.³³ Although Gladstone was a member of the nicknamed "Atheists' Society" (otherwise known as the Metaphysical Society), he was, of course, a sensitive high-churchman. Whether or not he actually named *The Martyrdom of Man*, he certainly made several references to the "mischief" of certain controversial books which had recently been published. "It is not now only the Christian church, not only the Holy Scriptures, not only Christianity which is attacked. The disposition is boldly proclaimed to deal alike with root and branch, and to snap the ties under which the still venerable name of religion unite man with the unseen world

and lighten the woes and struggles of life by hope of a better land."³⁴ This was the aspect of anti-religion which the agnostics also disliked — the vulgarity and cocksureness of atheistic anti-clericalism.

Even his obituary, written by his uncle, Charles Reade, had no more sympathy for him and his work. "In another fifteen years," he wrote, "he would probably have won a great name for himself, and cured himself. as many thinking men have done, of certain obnoxious opinions which laid him open to reasonable censure."35 But as we have seen, at the time when Winwood Reade wrote, he only wanted those "obnoxious opinions." He would not have called his book anything but The Martyrdom of Man, and in this he did show some prescience. He thought that the only way that man would progress was by forsaking all "myths and illusions" of religion or at least the religion that he knew. His prediction was that "a season of mental anguish is at hand, and through this we must pass in order that our posterity may rise. The soul must be sacrificed; the hope of immortality must die. A sweet and charming illusion must be taken from the human race, as youth and beauty vanish never to return."36

Perhaps he regretted having written this, as the genuinely agnostic *Outcast* seems to suggest. It did, after all, only take him three years to mellow that much. Nevertheless, *The Martyrdom of Man* must be seen for what it is — a brash and uncompromising attack on Christianity. The fact is, however, that the secularizing coup of the 1870's was accomplished more by the respectable agnostics who pretended not to stray beyond the bounds of gentlemanly controversy than by the self-styled martyrs of progress. So Reade's work was at once rejected and accepted. Perhaps he himself did not foresee the kind of attention which would be given to his book, or he might have tried to conform to some uncharacteristic convention. As it is, he wrote apparently in ignorance

of, or at least disdain of conventions, and the result was this most enigmatic and outspoken book. His spells in Africa may have also served to cut him off from the world of conventions and the etiquette of controversy, so that his book seemed so stark and blatant when it came out into the light of mid-Victorian faith-crises.

So *The Martyrdom of Man* does not fit into a category of literature in the 1870's; its author wrote a book which appealed to a different class from his own. The "secularization of consciousness" among educated men was not fundamentally effected by books like this one, but rather, by the writings of Huxley, Tyndall, Galton, and Spencer. However, at a time when movements and trends seem so important to the historian of literature and ideas, it is refreshing to find a work that defies categorization, and stands provocatively on its own.

NOTES

- ¹William Winwood Reade, *The Martyrdom of Man* (1872; rpt., London: Pemberton Books, 1968), p. 435.
- ²Annals of English Literature (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961).
- ³W. S. Smith *The London Heretics* (London: Constable, 1967), p. 5.
- 4The Saturday Review 12th Oct. 1872, pp. 474-75.
- 5M. Foot, intro. to 1968 ed. of The Martyrdom of Man.
- ⁶J. M. Robertson A History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century (London: Watts & Co., 1929), p. 397.
- ⁷This was, of course, the year in which *The Origin of Species*, Mill's *On Liberty*, and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* were published.
- 8The Athenaeum 1859, 1, p. 320.
- ⁹The London Critic 28th Jan. 1860.
- ¹⁰It is a measure of his ambition that he was only precluded from calling *The Martyrdom of Man The Origin of Mind* by the publication of Darwin's *Descent of Man* in 1871.
- ¹¹Legge, in intro. to 1924 edn. of *The Martyrdom of Man* p. xxiii. ¹²W. Winwood Reade Savage Africa p. 584.
- ¹³Martyrdom of Man, p. xxiii.
- 14ibid., p. 413.
- ¹⁵Beatrice Webb My Apprenticeship (London: Longmans, 1926), p. 130 ff.
- 16This, at least ostensibly, was the case. In fact, there was much latent animosity in the group.

¹⁷The Saturday Review 12th Oct. 1872, pp. 474-75.

¹⁸C.f. N. Annan in *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians* (New York: Dutton, 1966); A. O. J. Cockshut in *The Unbelievers*, (London: Collins, 1964), W. E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (London: Yale U.P., 1957), W. S. Smith *The London Heretics*, (London: Constable, 1967).

¹⁹The Martyrdom of Man p. 412.

²⁰J. Passmore The Perfectibility of Man (London: Duckworth, 1970), p. 262.

²¹The Martyrdom of Man p. 462.

²²The Athenaeum 11th May 1872, pp. 587-88.

²³The Martyrdom of Man, p. xvi.

²⁴ibid., p. 142.

²⁵ibid., p. 177. It is significant that he studiously avoided any mention of the resurrection.

²⁶The Martyrdom of Man, p. 422.

²⁷ibid., p. 422.

²⁸Susan Budd "The Loss of Faith" in Past and Present no. 36, 1967, p. 106.

²⁹The Saturday Review 12th Oct. 1872.

30Susan Budd, p. 106.

31W. Winwood Reade, The Outcast, 1875.

32Susan Budd, p. 114.

33J. M. Robertson vol. 2, p. 396, thinks so, but the *Times* report of the speech, *The Times* 23rd Dec. 1872, p. 8, does not mention it.

34The Times.

³⁵The Daily Telegraph 25th April 1875.

36The Martyrdom of Man, p. 447.