

John Witheridge, *In the Shadow of Death: A Life of Archibald Campbell Tait, Archbishop of Canterbury* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2021), pp. xiv + 193. ISBN 978-0-227-17744-0 (pbk).

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Archibald Campbell Tait was Queen Victoria's favourite Archbishop of Canterbury. In part, as Michael Ledger-Lomas has recently reminded us, this was because she appreciated pruned-back Liberal Protestant sincerity, but it was also because she saw in Tait a kindred spirit: one, like her, scarred by devastating loss. The brooding portrait that stares out from the cover of John Witheridge's short biography is an apt image for a life lived, as the title puts it, *In the Shadow of Death*. His mother died of a sudden heart attack when he was two; aged nine Tait survived the scarlet fever that killed his older brother; he almost died of rheumatic fever while headmaster of Rugby; and later in life he suffered and recovered from a double stroke, before illness (probably leukaemia) bore off his only son and grief took his wife six months later. Such a catalogue was not unusual in a period when medicine remained largely helpless in the face of severe illness. But the deaths of five out of six daughters during a harrowing five weeks of scarlet fever in spring 1856 was exceptional even for the time and elicited widespread sympathy for the heartbroken parents. It also brought Tait to the notice of the Queen, who sought to console him with the most important bishopric in the country, London, and who later placed him in the highest office of all. He came into the Primacy at a time of turmoil: the abolition of church rates, the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland, and the spread of ritualism, while the growing pains of the nascent Anglican communion placed enormous burdens on him.

While Tait is no longer a household name, his story has been well told before. Strictly speaking, as Witheridge observes, there has been only one biography: the sympathetic two-volume *Life* published by William Benham and Randall Davidson, Tait's chaplain, son-in-law and successor-but-two as archbishop, in 1891. To this, however, can be added frequent appearances in academic works on the relationship between Church and state, David Hughes's reflection on Catharine Tait's grief-stricken account of her daughters, *The Lent Jewels* (2002), and, most weightily, P.T. Marsh's *Victorian Church in Decline: Archbishop Tait and the Church of England, 1868–1882* (1969). Marsh viewed Tait as a giant, but one who nevertheless failed. Although he was garlanded at his death as having steered the Church of England through troublous times and avoided disestablishment, he was unable to prevent spirit-sapping internal conflicts, a loss of social cachet and a growing sense of decline. Witheridge does not significantly challenge this view. While there are some glimpses of revisionist intent ('Not since William Laud in the seventeenth century had a Primate of All England possessed a better understanding of his office or exercised a more active and statesmanlike role in Parliament and the life of the nation', p. xiii), this book, too, emphasizes the institutional overstretch that came to entangle an undoubtedly able Primate.

Perhaps surprisingly, given his use of Tait's extensive private journals, Witheridge, like Marsh before him, is stronger on the administrator than the man. Understandably so, maybe: Tait was, after all, a workaholic by both training

and temperament. He excelled at Latin and Greek at school in Edinburgh, and in the broader philosophy-heavy curriculum at Glasgow University. From there he went to Balliol College, Oxford, initially as an exhibitioner, then successively as scholar, fellow, tutor and finally the senior tutor. He was also President of the Union, just a couple of years after Gladstone, although unlike the latter he did not fall under the spell of John Henry Newman; quite the opposite, in fact. Tait was undoubtedly ambitious: brought up in the Church of Scotland, he chose in his first week in Oxford to be confirmed as an Anglican. Crushing awareness of the responsibility of the post, he nevertheless applied for and was appointed to the headmastership of Rugby after Thomas Arnold's sudden death in 1842. While the deanery of Carlisle was intended as a rest-cure after Rugby, Tait threw himself into restoring the cathedral and reviving pastoral work in the city. The recent advent of the railway, moreover, made his post less remote: he could accept Prime Minister Russell's invitation to serve on the new royal commission into the state of Oxford University, a reforming initiative staffed largely by Broad Churchmen hostile to Tractarianism. Weekly attendance in Downing Street for meetings cannot have harmed his chances of advancement, but even so, the offer of London was unexpected. Nevertheless, he accepted it, as he later did Canterbury, with almost unseemly haste.

If focusing on Tate as a doer is revealing, it also risks caricaturing him as a tidy-minded Erastian statesman who sought to bully a ritualist movement he neither liked nor understood. Witheridge is too good a scholar to do this, but while Anglo-Catholic piety is fairly easy for sympathetic modern church people to envisage, giving life to Victorian Liberal Protestantism – the awe inspired by Arnold, the dismay of a onetime Scottish Presbyterian at Tractarian sacerdotalism, the anger of former pupils and colleagues at Tait's hawing over *Essays and Reviews*, for instance – is a much harder task for the historian. This reviewer longed for a more extensive exploration of Tait's inner life. And what, I wonder, did Kitty Tait – herself a convinced high churchwoman – think of her husband's anti-ritualism? Their marriage is not much explored. What we make of Tait depends, ultimately, upon the backdrop we set him against. Disraeli's attempt to dissuade the Queen from elevating him ('though earnest and conscientious, a prey to conflicting convictions', p. 110) seems in retrospect prescient, not least given his abortive moves against ritualism. But while it might once have made sense to dismiss Tait's epic five-hour first episcopal charge as self-indulgent, reassessments of the Victorian Church have underlined that this was a rich, confident institution led by rich, confident men. Tait certainly had to weather political storms. Like all archbishops he made mistakes; and like some others he was sometimes seen as closer to government than he was to the Church. Yet it would be a mistake to extrapolate from that to a story of obvious decline. I spotted a couple of slips: the Tractarian clergyman Walter Kerr Hamilton appears consistently as 'William', while E.B. Pusey was never a Roman Catholic (p. 121) – was the author thinking of Henry Manning?

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