

HEROES + HERETICS

Alex Bunn looks at the poor man's earl

HEROES 15: LORD SHAFTESBURY (1801–1885)

What links Piccadilly Circus, scrotal cancer, a Prime Minister's love child and Zionism? The clue is in the title, so read on!

You probably recognise the famous statue in Piccadilly Circus in London's West End, also the logo for a major newspaper. The crowds of theatre-goers are likely to call him Eros (or his Roman equivalent Cupid). But he is in fact Anteros, Eros' brother. The angel of Christian charity¹ points his bow down Shaftesbury Avenue, to celebrate the Victorian by this name. But why have we (literally) put an evangelical on a pedestal in the heart of London?

the God of all comfort: the making of a hero

On 3 August 1833, Anthony Ashley-Cooper, the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury, attended the funeral of another great hero at Westminster Abbey. William Wilberforce² had been a tireless champion of the abolition of slavery, and a great model for Victorian evangelicals who



saw that faith entailed social action:

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.

(Proverbs 31:8)

But although born into wealth and influence, Anthony the boy was an unlikely hero. He was neglected and bullied by his father. Bringing him to one of the boarding schools which he would attend, his father knocked down the

sensitive boy at the door and advised the tutor to do the same.³ Ashley carried scars of depression with him all his life. Yet out of an evil, God brought good.⁴ His empathy was a strange kind of gift:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)



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Thankfully, the deficiencies of his distant parents were compensated by the kindness of a maid called Maria Millis⁵ who warmed his heart to gospel faith, with a huge impact on the nation later. Likewise who knows what impact you might be having in your Sunday school or youth work without any immediate visible reward?

sheer madness

Shaftesbury was elected as a Tory MP, and used his maiden speech to press for reform of the Lunacy Laws. In 1828 an inspectorate was commissioned to visit a 'madhouse' in Bethnal Green. Inmates were penned like animals, toileting in their beds, washed by dousing in freezing water and dried with a single towel used for 160 people. It was described as 'a mere place for dying' with no attempt at treatment. The subsequent bills required licensing and inspection of mental institutions, and were a major milestone towards compassionate holistic care. Given to bouts of depression himself, perhaps his empathy caused him to reflect 'there but by the grace of God go I'.

Life wasn't much better for the sane: Dickens' novels were based on observation not



imagination. Children routinely worked punishing hours, but Shaftesbury was a tireless campaigner for working hours reform, something that junior doctors have only latterly benefited from! In 1833, his Factory Reform Bill proposed that children should be at least nine to work in cotton or wool industries, and that under eighteens could not work more than ten hours per day, eight on Saturday. Like Wilberforce before him, he faced powerful vested interests, and his motion was watered down to

an age limit of 13, and eventually defeated. He also had to wait patiently another 14 years to see teenagers protected from what seems obvious today as exploitation. Likewise in 1842 he managed to outlaw the employment of women and children below ground in mines.

climbing boys

Another cause close to his heart was chimney sweeps or 'climbing boys'. Perhaps we remember them as loveable rogues from Mary Poppins, but their plight was less rose-tinted. Many were illegitimate, white slaves sold by their parents who had few routes out of poverty.

The exposure to hot soot caused scorched skin, eyes, throat, occasional suffocation and (medical students should know) cancer of the scrotum. In 1840, Shaftesbury outlawed employing boys as chimney sweeps, but many firms exploited the cheap labour and ignored the ban. Shaftesbury formed the London Climbing Boys' Society, and brought in licensing that finally eradicated the practice.



I should die of a broken heart'.⁶

gospel and social justice both

But no one could accuse Shaftesbury of social action eclipsing gospel proclamation. He was the leading evangelical layman in the church of England, and passionate about sharing the gospel through his high profile sponsorship of societies such as

It wasn't merely a distant cause like fair trade in Africa, or a campaign to gain political capital. Shaftesbury discovered a climbing boy living behind his house in Brock Street and sent him to Union School at Norwood Hill 'where under God's blessing and special merciful grace, he will be trained in the knowledge and love and faith of our common saviour'.

the Church Missionary Society, the Religious Tract Society, Bible Society and the Church Pastoral Aid Society.

ragged schools

Education was a massive deficit for children who had been seen only as a source of cheap labour. Shaftesbury wanted to change that, and in 1844 he formed the Ragged School Union. Over the next eight years, over 200 schools were established to provide free education for poor children for the first time. He helped raise funds for a total of 350 ragged schools before a national educational system was finally established in 1870. Shaftesbury wrote that 'if the Ragged School system were to fail I should not die in the course of nature,

family connections and Jewish restoration

Shaftesbury had married into some powerful connections. His wife Emily Cowper was officially the stepdaughter, but probably the natural daughter, of Lord Palmerston, who had married her mother after her birth. Her uncle was Lord Melbourne. Both in-laws became Prime Ministers! He used his influence for others wherever he could.

In 1838 Shaftesbury persuaded Palmerston, then Foreign Minister and otherwise sceptical of evangelicals, to send a British consul to Jerusalem. He argued for a Jewish return because he believed that it was God's will, and entailed political and economic benefits to Britain. He provided the first proposal by a major politician to resettle Jews in Palestine:

It is surely a high privilege reserved to our Church and nation to plant the true cross on the Holy Hill of Zion; to carry back the faith we thence received by the apostles; and uniting, as it were, the history, the labours, and the blood of the primitive and Protestant martyrs, light such a candle in Jerusalem, as by God's blessing shall never be put out.

This quote refers to a previous *Nucleus* hero, Hugh Latimer, whose 'candle' was his own body set alight for the gospel in England.⁷ Shaftesbury also challenged Christians to see God's activity in contemporary history, and his concern for his first chosen people:

No sooner had England given shelter to the Jews, under Cromwell and Charles, than she started forward in a commercial career of unrivalled and uninterrupted prosperity; while Spain, in her furious and bloody expulsion of the race, sealed her own condemnation...it may be reckoned among the most effective causes of the decline of Spanish greatness.

We oftentimes express our surprise at the stubborn resistance they oppose to the reception of Christianity; but Christianity in their view is synonymous with image-worship, and its doctrines with persecution...It well imports us to have a care that we no longer persecute or mislead this once-loved nation; they are a people chastened, but not utterly cast off; 'in all their affliction He was afflicted.' For the oppression of this people there is no warrant in Scripture; nay, the reverse; their oppressors are menaced with stern judgments.⁸

funeral

Although offered the honour of a tomb in Westminster Abbey, he declined. But on 8

Reflection on Shaftesbury's life

- God turned his sensitivity to compassion. Which patients do you identify with most, and how will that affect your career choices?
- Shaftesbury was a voice for the voiceless, restraining the exploitation of the poor and vulnerable before we had 'human rights'.
- But he was passionate about gospel proclamation as well as social justice. How can we do both today?

Further reading

- Georgina Battiscombe, *Shaftesbury: A Biography of the Seventh Earl*. 1801-1885 (London: Constable, 1974)
- Richard Turnbull, *Shaftesbury: The Great Reformer*. (Lion, 2010)
- John Pollock, *Shaftesbury: The Poor Man's Earl*. (Hodder & Stoughton, 1985)

October 1885, the streets along from Grosvenor Square to Westminster Abbey were rammed to witness his funeral cortege. Not the usual crowd for a state occasion: costermongers, flower-girls, boot-blacks, crossing-sweepers, factory-hands and similar workers who waited for hours to pay their respects. Due to his constant advocacy for the poor and marginalised, Shaftesbury became known as the 'Poor Man's Earl'. Not a great image! ■

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4. Genesis 50:20 see Joseph's story
5. Lord Shaftesbury (Antony Ashley Cooper). *Christianity Today*, 2008 bit.ly/1sf65oj
6. Battiscombe G. *Shaftesbury: A biography of the seventh earl, 1801-1885*. London: Constable, 1974:196
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