CHAPTER 1

Arthur Macdonald Allchin (1930–2010)

A Personal Tribute

Barry A. Orford
Priest Librarian 2001–14
Pusey House, Oxford

Notwithstanding his baptismal names, Father Allchin was always Donald to his friends and acquaintances. His career was a remarkable one, embracing among other things a Canonry of Canterbury Cathedral, the care of the St. Theosevia Center for Christian Spirituality in Oxford, and visiting lectureships abroad. From Pusey House's viewpoint he must be considered one of our most distinguished Priest Librarians.

One of four children, Donald Allchin was a Londoner. He was educated at Westminster School, where one of his teachers was Robert Llewelyn, the priest and writer on spirituality who later had a rich ministry at the Julian Shrine in Norwich. Another friendship which started at school was that with a younger boy, Timothy Ware, who joined the Orthodox Church, was ordained, and received the name Kallistos. Metropolitan Kallistos spoke movingly at Donald's funeral of their long and uninterrupted friendship.

It would seem that Donald's interest in the church and spirituality started young, because he recorded that at school he was encouraged by

Father Llewelyn to read the *Spiritual Letters* of the noted authority on mysticism, Evelyn Underhill.[1] He commented that the picture of her inside the book reminded him of one of his aunts. She was a writer to whom he returned frequently over the years, and on whom he wrote with discernment.

From Westminster School Donald came to Oxford, where he was a member of Christ Church. After graduation he proceeded to his BLitt, and with that good fortune which seemed to attend his life he was supervised by the Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History, Claude Jenkins. While at Christ Church it must have pleased Donald to be in close proximity to the house where Dr. Pusey had lived, and he told me delightedly that on one occasion Professor Jenkins had referred to the familiar small doorway in Tom Quad as "Dr. Danby's house—Dr. Pusey's, as was," almost, said Donald, as if Dr. Pusey had left the house only a few weeks before.

More than once I tried to persuade Donald to write down his recollections of Claude Jenkins, one of Oxford's legendary eccentrics, who survives in several hilarious pages of Eric Mascall's autobiography,[2] but alas, he never did. A volume containing his memories of Jenkins and others of the important figures he had known would have been valuable indeed. Let me, then, record a story which Donald told me about his supervisor. Jenkins' learning was enormous but unsystematic, and he published little more than an occasional article. A book that did see the light of day was a small study of the Victorian theologian F. D. Maurice. All of the publisher's copies were destroyed during a World War II air raid, causing Jenkins to say Donald, with some satisfaction, "You see? I'm not *meant* to publish anything."

I have wondered whether a part of Claude Jenkins' legacy to his pupil was the gift of untidiness. The professorial abode in Christ Church was stuffed with books from ground floor to attic, stacked in tottering towers filling all available spaces including the bath. (It is still possible to buy a postcard showing the entrance hall with its mountains of volumes on the floor and rising up the staircase.) Those who knew Donald's houses in later years will have received an accurate impression of Jenkins' residence, and the similarity was not confined to his home.

1. Underhill, *Letters*, 1951.
2. Mascall, *Saraband,* 1992.

Donald's study in Bangor, North Wales. Photo courtesy of David Keller.

At some point Donald contrived, by means unclear to me, to pass his driving test. The inside of his car, at least when I knew it, was an extension of the clutter of his house.

To be a passenger in Donald's car was to have your faith in guardian angels (your own and his) increased tenfold. I remember an occasion in North Wales when he drove us from Bangor to find lunch near Beaumaris. All through the journey a large spider swung lazily from the driving mirror. At no point did we go above thirty miles per hour, and usually we were somewhat below it, which meant that we quickly acquired a lengthy tail of irate motorists who could not pass us on the winding road. Donald, holding forth on some aspect of Welsh folk singing, was unaware of any problem.

The subject of Donald's BLitt thesis was the revival of religious communities in the Church of England in the nineteenth century. The Regius Professor may have derived a certain wry humour from the topic—Donald remembered Jenkins saying to a departing visitor, "Here comes Allchin with his nuns" as his student came into view—but the result was published in 1958 as *The Silent Rebellion*.[3] It was a ground-breaking study, and half

3. Allchin, *The Silent Rebellion*, 1958.

a century later it remains an indispensable contribution to the history of Anglican religious communities.

Three years ago, when Archbishop Rowan Williams awarded Donald the long overdue honour of a Doctorate of Divinity, I was able to contribute to the citation another story involving Claude Jenkins, who once said to Donald, "The trouble with you, young man, is that you *enjoy* life too much." Certainly Donald enjoyed life greatly. He enjoyed meeting people and was endlessly interested in what they might be studying or doing. He enjoyed travelling and he enjoyed good food. (The latter, it must be said, contributed to a marked increase in his girth in mid-life.) He was, in the best sense of the word, an *enthusiast*, constantly finding new material in areas which interested him and showing unexpected connections between them. Awarding Donald his DD, Archbishop Rowan hit the mark when he said, "Jenkins probably did not know that Donald Allchin had been born on Easter Day. It may or may not be consequential that his theology is one of the resurrection rather than of the passion. He is one of life's natural encouragers who fosters, both in his writings or in personal encounter, the theological virtue of *hope*. This gift of compelling enthusiasm and imaginative sympathy has enabled Donald to perceive illuminating likenesses between such unlikely pairs as Maximus the Confessor and Richard Hooker, Ann Griffiths and Elizabeth of Dijon, Solzhenytsyn and Pantycelyn, Evelyn Underhill and the Italian Sorella Maria.[4] Here we see something, not only of the breadth of his interest and scholarship, but also of an essential—perhaps *the essential*-quality of his mind. In Donald we celebrate a bridge-builder; one who connects and sees connections."

My first sighting of Donald was when I was an ordinand at St. Stephen's House, Oxford, at that time still in Norham Gardens. He was one of the speakers in a course of lectures on spirituality, and he addressed us on Julian of Norwich. I regret that I cannot remember what he said, except that one of Julian's visions was rather frightening, but he appeared almost the archetypal Anglican cleric, smooth, pink, and neat in a Sarum cassock. We disrespectful students were more impressed by the redoubtable Mother Mary Clare from Fairacres, who came to speak on the Carmelites and put everyone, including our principal, in their place.

4. Ann Griffiths (1776–1805) and William Williams of Pantycelyn (1717–91) were notable Methodist hymn writers, the latter familiar from his hymn, "Guide me, O thou great Redeemer," translated from his Welsh original. Ann Griffiths was the subject of one of Donald's best contributions to Welsh studies, *Ann Griffiths, the Furnace and the Fountain*, originally published in 1976 and reprinted in a revised form in 1987.

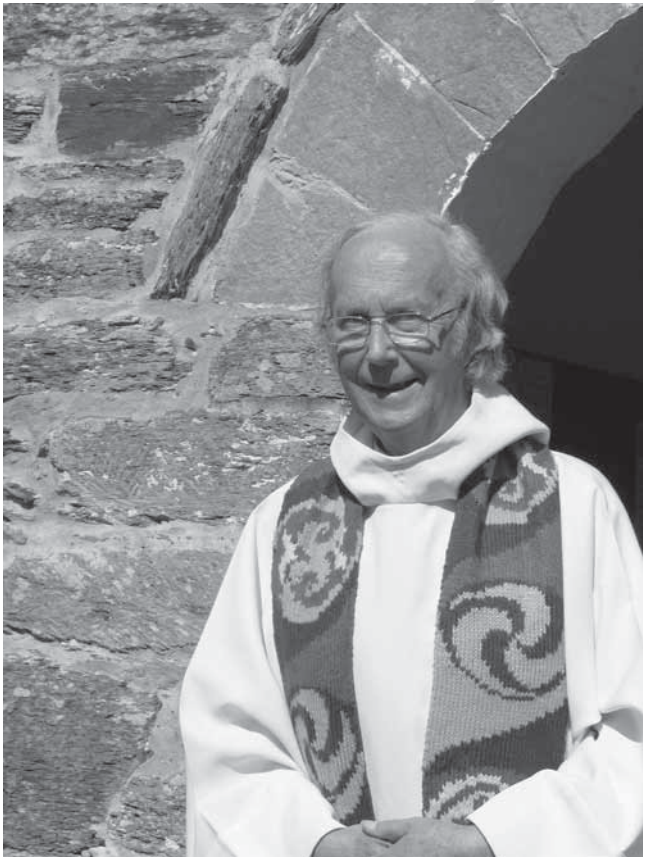
Some years later, when I was a curate in the Monmouth diocese, our clergy conference was held in Oxford, and Donald lectured to us. By this time his interest in things Welsh was well known, and I remember his beginning with a few words in Welsh. Later still, when I was a member of the Community of the Resurrection in Mirfield, he was invited to lead our community retreat. There was a general feeling that what he gave us was excellent material, but not really food for a retreat. The reason for this became clear shortly afterward, when many of the words he had spoken appeared in his book, *Participation in God*,[5] a fascinating study of the doctrine of *theosis* (deification), and its place in the Anglican tradition, not least in the writings of Dr. Pusey.

I came to know Donald personally when he lived in North Wales, in Bangor, during the 1990s. An uphill walk from the railway station led to the rather down-at-heel house in Snowdon View Terrace where Donald lived amid the clutter previously described. In due course his brother Bill, a highly respected psychologist, came to live in the adjoining house. ("We'll have an Allchin enclave," said Donald cheerfully.) Donald acted as my supervisor for both my Master's degree and my Doctorate. By then the clean-cut, youthful looking clergyman had become a bulky, slightly dishevelled figure, whose long hair gave him a somewhat bardic appearance. He was an excellent supervisor, insisting on written material being submitted regularly and making insightful comments on what I wrote. He struggled hard to make me keep my eye on the wood rather than on particular trees, and drew my attention to sources I should otherwise have missed. However, a session with Donald could never be restricted simply to the matter in hand, and it was inspiring to listen as he talked about the people, the books and the experiences which stocked his mind.

His decision to move to Bangor must have surprised many, but it is not difficult to see why he did it. He found there not only the stimulation of a university setting, but one which had lively departments of Theology and Welsh Studies. It was exceptional for an English scholar to set to work studying Welsh, but Donald did it with vigour and must have relished the opportunity to soak himself in the living Welsh ethos. He claimed to me that he could not really speak Welsh, but certainly he could read it well and he entered into fruitful dialogue with scholars of Welsh language and literature, among them Professor Bedwyr Lewis Jones, whose relatively early death was a great loss to Welsh studies, and Professor Densil Morgan,

5. Allchin, *Participation in God*, 1988.

with whom he wrote a book on the poet Gwenallt. This volume was one of a series of books in which he tried to make his fellow Englishmen (and, it must be said, not a few natives of Wales) aware of the amazing riches and durability of Welsh culture, not least its spiritual heritage. He did not stop at theory, however. He was keen to revive the tradition of pilgrimage which had once flourished in these islands, and so he was influential in establishing Bardsey Island, off the Llyn Peninsula, as a place to be visited by those seeking quiet and solitude. No less important was his involvement with the restoration of the church and shrine at Pennant Melangell which in recent years has seen a remarkable growth in the ministry of healing. His guide books to Bardsey and Pennant Melangell are concise, informative and inspiring.



Donald Allchin at the entrance to the church and shrine at Pennant Melangell. Photo courtesy of David Keller.

It was inevitable that Donald should be sought out by those interested in the study of "Celtic Spirituality." Here he was keen but cautious. The sentimental cult of nature has too often crept into this area, and Donald was anxious that what was said of the spirituality of the Celtic church should have a firm grounding in history. After I had joined the Chapter of Pusey House Donald twice came to stay in our guest room. On the second occasion he was recovering from a bout of illness. As a result he had lost a lot of weight, which suited him, and he seemed more tired, but the enthusiasm was still there and as always his conversation ranged widely over topics which interested both of us. He presented me with copies of pamphlets which he had published recently, and characteristically he gave a copy of one of them, which was on a Welsh subject, to our Welsh-speaking Sacristan. He had asked me a while before whether I thought he should gather together for publication some of the essays on Tractarian themes which he had written over the years. I wished very much that he should, but in the event he never did so. There must be a huge accumulation of material which Donald did not publish in book form, and I hope that a discerning literary executor will set to work to make some of it available to us.

Two or three years later it came as a surprise to me to discover that Donald had left Bangor and was living near Oxford, and I began to hear disquieting rumours suggesting that all was not well with him. When I learned that he had been taken to hospital in Oxford, I went to see him. He was clearly in some confusion about his surroundings, but he answered readily when I asked him about people he had known and books he had read. Subsequent visits revealed a rapid deterioration in his physical and mental condition, however, and his death just before Christmas was in every way a blessing.

This is not the place to attempt a critical estimate of Donald's writings. He said to me that he had come to the conclusion that the essay was his natural length, and I think this was true. Almost all his books have their origins in occasional papers and lectures, the notable exceptions being his first book on the Religious Life and his later studies of the Danish theologian Grundtvig (for which he had learned Danish) and the Welsh spiritual tradition which he examined in *Praise Above All*.[6] When the latter book appeared I was asked to be one of its reviewers, and I remember voicing a concern that because there was such an emphasis on praise and joy it seemed sometimes that the cross and human suffering were not

6. Allchin, *Praise Above All,* 1991.

allowed their due weight. I would revise that opinion now, but there is no question that Archbishop Rowan was right in describing Donald's theology as primarily one of the Resurrection. It was this outlook which made him particularly sympathetic to the spirituality of the Eastern church, and the distinguished Orthodox theologians Vladimir Lossky and Dumitru Staniloae were friends of his. During his last weeks in hospital a photograph of Fr. Staniloae with a young Donald Allchin had a place near his bed, and Donald spoke with some pride of his association with him.

Donald was someone who could be described as "Anglican to the core" but there was nothing insular about his Anglicanism. He was one of a number of theologians who have sensed similarities of approach between Catholic-minded Anglicanism and Orthodoxy. From an early age he was a member of the Society of St. Alban and St. Sergius, which works to foster Anglican-Orthodox relations. Although he had many Roman Catholic friends, notably the famous Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton, I felt that Rome did not speak to him in the way that Orthodoxy clearly did. On the other hand, he stood apart from both traditions when he came to support strongly the ordination of women to the priesthood.

The monastic life was a continuing concern of Donald's, and he worked closely with the Sisters of the Love of God at Fairacres in Oxford and with the sisters of the Society of the Sacred Cross at Tymawr, near Monmouth. I do not know whether he had ever considered the Religious Life as his vocation, but he never joined a community. Probably he was too free a spirit to be confined by monastic institutions, greatly though he valued them.

Of Donald's time as a Priest Librarian at Pusey House I cannot write. He never told me in detail of those years which stretched from 1960 to 1969. He served under Father Hugh Maycock, another builder of book piles and paper mounds which choked his rooms. Donald always spoke of Father Hugh with enormous affection. It is easy to see why they should have complemented each other, given their wide interests and the breadth of their reading. In 2002, when Father Davage and I were preparing a collection of essays on the Principals of Pusey House to honour Father Philip Ursell on his retirement, I asked Donald to write the chapter on Father Maycock. After some coaxing, the necessary pages appeared in manuscript. (Typing was not an Allchin skill.) A passage toward the end of the chapter says as much about Donald as it does about Father Hugh:

> The precariousness of existence, the mystery and absurdity of tragedy and waste and evil, these were things he would not and could

> not ignore. They raised questions with which he never ceased to wrestle, but ultimately they could not quench his joy. For him there was endless wonder in the prodigality of the universe . . . .
>
> His life, so apparently filled with human interests, his numerous friends of all ages, the volumes of biography and literature, history and astronomy, philosophy and theology which lined the walls of his room and overflowed onto the floor, all these ultimately had their deepest significance for him in God.[7]

In due course scholars will get to work on Donald's published legacy. But however great the value of his writings—and I believe Donald's work to be of vital importance to a Church of England desperately impoverished by a lack of knowledge of its own theological heritage—it is the man himself who will stay with those of us privileged to have known him. As Archbishop Rowan pointed out, Donald was almost a one-man ecumenical movement, and his ecumenism was based not on laborious meetings of eminent divines but on the call to share in the worship of God, who is the source of our ultimate unity. Alas, it is not easy to see how such a mission as Donald's could flourish in today's bureaucracy-stifled church, yet never was there a greater need for a Donald Allchin to call us to raise our eyes to the heavens while celebrating the things of earth. If *glory* was the word ever on the lips of Archbishop Michael Ramsey, then *praise* is the word always to be associated with Donald. The title of his book *Praise Above All* comes from a poem by the eighteenth-century poet Christopher Smart, and it captures the essence of Donald's spirit and his message:

> Praise above all—for praise prevails
> Heap up the measure, load the scales,
> And good to goodness add:
> The gen'rous soul her saviour aids
> But peevish obloquy degrades;
> The Lord is great and glad.[8]

7. Orford and Davage, *Piety and Learning*, 84.
8. Allchin, *Praise Above All*, quoted in Acknowledgements, xiii.