Chapter Four

Dr Arnold's Successor

'I quite quake for the awful responsibility of putting on that giant's armour.'

A year before his sudden death, Thomas Arnold had been appointed Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford. The post was prestigious and salaried, though it was not residential and required no more than an annual series of lectures. Arnold's Oxford pupils were delighted, not only that Arnold's gifts had been recognised at last, but that now a powerful alternative to Newman and Tractarianism had a platform in Oxford. Arnold, however, was determined to avoid partisanship and personalities, and to lecture 'without seeking occasions of shocking men's favourite opinions'.[1] His first lecture, given on 2 December 1841, was a definition of modern history, which then comprised of European history from the fall of Rome to the present. Stanley was thrilled:

> Everyone who loves Arnold ought to have been present at the august scene of his Inaugural Lecture last Thursday. . . . The usual place is a small room in the Clarendon Buildings; but fortunately we had so far anticipated the amount of the audience as to secure the Sheldonian Theatre. But the numbers were far more than anyone could have expected, far more than any professor has addressed in Oxford since the Middle Ages. . . . It was certainly one of the most glorious days of my life; to listen once more to that clear, manly voice in the relation of a pupil to a teacher, to feel that one of the most important Professorships was filled by a man with genius and energy capable of discharging its duties, to see him standing in his proper place at last and receiving the homage of the assembled University, was most striking and most touching.[2]

Arnold returned in January 1842 with his wife and eight of their nine children to deliver the first series of lectures. They lodged in a house in Beaumont Street, not far from Balliol, where Matthew was in his second year. Arnold found himself sitting next to Newman at a gaudy in Oriel College; according to Stanley, 'they talked on indifferent matters, and got on very well together'.[3] The lectures were popular and drew unprecedented audiences of 300 or more. At least to Arnold's supporters it seemed that the tide against Tractarianism was turning.

The lectures made frequent use of phrases such as 'if life and health be spared me', 'if God shall permit', 'if I am allowed to resume these lectures next year'. Looking back, it was evident to Stanley that Arnold had sensed his approaching demise. His death, however, came as a profound shock to those who knew him. Lake had been staying with the Arnolds at Rugby when it happened, and he gave Stanley the details when he joined him the following evening. This was, wrote Stanley, 'so terrible a convulsion'[4] and 'a dreadful calamity, the greatest that ever has – almost the greatest that ever can befall me'.[5] For Arnold's Oxford pupils, the grief and shock were intensified by his recent presence. Jowett too, though not a Rugbeian, and who had heard the news from Tait, told a friend: 'I shall never forget his noble appearance in the theatre at the inaugural lecture. It is pleasing indeed to remember that he was the first person who really conducted a public school on Christian principles.'[6]

Attention soon turned to Arnold's successor as headmaster. 'Stanley and myself', wrote Lake, 'were very anxious for Tait's election to the post, believing him to be the one person who was most likely to continue the work in the spirit and something of the power of his predecessor.'[7] Oakeley also encouraged Tait to apply, on the grounds that Tait, like Arnold, regarded education as moral training and not mere instruction.[8] Doubts were expressed too, especially about Tait's abilities as a classical scholar. Stanley wrote to him about the great difficulty of his want of scholarship,[9] and Lake told him very frankly that 'my main fears are for your sermons being dull, and your Latin Prose, and Composition generally, weak, in which latter points you will have, I think, hard work'.[10] Tait disagreed but it is a fact that he was better qualified to teach philosophy and history than the Greek and Latin he would be required to teach at Rugby. Nonetheless, and despite many a warning like Lake's that 'no one in the whole of England can do Arnold's work as he did it',[11] Tait declared himself a candidate. 'O Lord,' he wrote in his journal, 'I have this day taken a step which may lead to much good or much evil.'[12]

The field was strong, with nineteen candidates. Eight, including Tait, were tutors at Oxford or Cambridge. Five were headmasters, among them Herbert Kynaston, High Master of St Paul's, and Benjamin Hall Kennedy,

the distinguished Latinist and Headmaster of Shrewsbury. Two candidates had strong Arnoldian credentials, Charles Vaughan, a friend at Rugby of Lake and Stanley, who had won every classical prize at Cambridge; and Bonamy Price, who had been taught by Arnold and appointed by him to the Rugby staff. It was customary then for candidates to collect as many as fifty or more testimonials and to have them printed and bound. Tait submitted forty-two, many of which were careful to describe him as a natural successor to Arnold. Arnold's death had frozen any criticism of his performance as headmaster, and the trustees were united in looking for a man who would continue his work, and in much the same manner. Lake wrote that 'religion was inculcated by Mr. Tait as a college tutor with an earnestness and wisdom not unlike that of Dr. Arnold';[13] Ward that 'Mr Tait is peculiarly well fitted to carry on the system pursued by the late lamented head-master';[14] and Oakeley that 'he is most likely to carry on the excellent system of moral and religious superintendence, adopted by the late Dr. Arnold'.[15]

There were no interviews but the testimonials were such that two candidates emerged as front-runners, Vaughan and Tait. Both were among the youngest; Tait was thirty and Vaughan only twenty-five. Vaughan seemed unbeatable as the applicant most in Arnold's image. Arnold had taught him for three years in the sixth form, had held him in high regard, and had offered him a teaching post.* 'I can truly say', Vaughan told the trustees, 'that, if I should be elected to this office, it will be my earnest desire, and the business of my life at Rugby, to carry on the system which Dr Arnold has there established.'[16] Furthermore, given the number of first-rate classical scholars on the list, Vaughan included, the preference for Tait is surprising. The support of Stanley and Lake would certainly have helped his cause, though their recommendations were not without reservations, and they had also written testimonials for Vaughan. Tait's exceptional gifts as a teacher and tutor would also have counted, but it was Tait's reputation in Oxford for earnest moral leadership that made him the chosen candidate. His protest against Tract 90 was well known too, and provided strong evidence that he shared Arnold's (and indeed most of the trustees') disapproval of Tractarianism.

Tait's election was announced on 28 July 1842. Stanley and Lake were not as gratified as might be expected, and instead the election revived their grief at Arnold's death, and their anxiety that no man was worthy to succeed him. Lake was present in Rugby when he heard the news, and wrote immediately to Stanley, on black-bordered writing paper: 'I felt little

*. Vaughan turned this down in favour of a fellowship at Trinity College, Cambridge. He was appointed Headmaster of Harrow in 1844.

else for dear Tait than a sense of the vast responsibility laid upon him. It was anything but pleasure, for the recollection of him we have lost was more real than ever.'[17] Stanley wrote to Tait in the most earnest terms:

> The awful intelligence of your election has just reached me. . . . I have not heart to say more than that I conjure you by your friendship for me, your reverence for your great predecessor, your sense of the sacredness of your office, your devotion to Him whose work you are now more than ever called upon to do, to lay aside every thought for the present except that of repairing your deficiencies. . . . Read Arnold's sermons. . . throw yourself thoroughly into his spirit. Alter nothing at first. See all that is good and nothing that is bad in the masters and the Rugby character.[18]

Tait's journal suggests that he felt no less gloomy than Arnold's pupils. 'God, be merciful to me, a miserable sinner. . . . When entering on this new situation, let no worldly thoughts deceive me. The sudden death of him whom I succeed should be enough to prevent this. Grant me, O Lord, to live each day as I would wish to die. Let me view this event, not as success, but as the opening up of a fresh field of labour in Thy vineyard.'[19] The same day Tait wrote, 'with very mixed feelings', to the Master of Balliol to resign his fellowship.[20]

* * *

Just a fortnight later, on the first Sunday of the new school year, Tait was installed in Rugby's chapel. This was incidental, however, to an occasion that was dedicated to the memory of Arnold. 'The whole service was most awful', wrote Stanley, who had been asked to preach. 'Tait sitting in the old place, all the boys assembled, and the pulpit and desks hung with black, made a confusion of past and present that one could not understand.'[21] Stanley's rambling eulogy did not help Tait's cause. Not only did he extol the virtues of 'the greatest man who ever filled the office of Head Master', but he called on Tait to continue his work.[22]

Living and working in Arnold's shadow threatened to be very difficult indeed, and it is a sign of Tait's courage and ambition that he had accepted the position. Advice had been legion since his appointment. Tait's predecessor as tutor at Balliol, George Moberly, now Headmaster of Winchester, urged him to be himself.[23] George Butler, a former Headmaster of Harrow, now Dean of Peterborough, offered career advice: 'Remember, young man, never lose sight of Church preferment.'[24] But most advice (and it came from former pupils and masters) was much the same as Stanley's.

The masters (most of whom had been appointed by Arnold) had no wish to see change, and were ready to disapprove of any successor whose character or methods were different. George Cotton,* who had broken his engagement to Arnold's daughter, wrote to Tait the day after his election: 'I can most truly say for myself, and I am sure for the other Masters also, that our one desire is to continue to do our utmost to prosecute Dr. Arnold's views in Dr. Arnold's spirit.'[25] This same loyalty to the past can be seen in G. F. Bradby's satirical school novel, *The Lanchester Tradition* (1914). Bradby had been at Rugby for over thirty years, as boy and master, with Balliol in between. Chiltern School in his novel is clearly Rugby, and Abraham Lanchester, whose sacred memory dominates the school, is Arnold. Though Bradby's time at Rugby was later than Tait's, and though he draws on his experience of four other headmasters, the entrenched conservatism he describes was the same. 'The Lanchester tradition permeates the place like an atmosphere, invisible but stimulating.'[26]

The essence of Arnold's power and influence had been his extraordinarily dominant personality, and his passionate moral and religious seriousness. This was communicated to the boys through his Sunday afternoon sermons, which riveted their attention in chapel, and through his teaching, where he aimed to draw moral lessons from history. 'When we looked in his face, when we heard him speak from the pulpit, when we heard him in the Big School reading prayers, or heard him in the library teaching the Sixth Form, we saw that he was always acting, or trying to act, as in the presence of God, enjoying all the innocent pleasures of life because God had given them to him – turning away from everything base, or mean, or dishonourable because he knew that God abhorred it.'[27] Creating a school where Christian faith and values were of paramount importance was always Arnold's aim, and it was this, more than any other reform, that had come to distinguish Rugby from the worldliness and brutality of other public schools.†

Tait lacked Arnold's intensity and charisma but, as the trustees had perceived, he shared a similar religious earnestness, and was clear that building on Arnold's foundations was a priority. The day before his election he had told a friend that 'if it were in my power to keep up that system which Dr Arnold has begun, I should certainly think my life well spent'.[28] Arnold's widow wrote to him: 'It is an unspeakable comfort to me confidently to believe that in the first great desire of my husband's heart – to

*. The Young Master in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, he became Tait's friend and ally, and was later Master of Marlborough and Bishop of Calcutta.

†. The same reform was taken to over 20 schools by headmasters who had been masters or pupils at Rugby.

make Rugby a truly Christian school, you will so entirely sympathise.'[29] It was above all this common purpose that recommended Tait to the masters and made his succeeding Arnold possible. There were other reasons too for their regard, not least Tait's quiet confidence and industry. His sermons, though never delivered with the same passion as Arnold's, were earnest and devout, and not dissimilar in content.[30] It was said that no one could sneer at them, and no one did. When it came to teaching, any predicted shortcomings in classical scholarship were corrected by careful preparation, and 'he always left on the mind of the Sixth the idea of conscientious and thorough work'.[31] Though Tait was willing to follow in Arnold's footsteps, he was not uncritical. George Bradley, who had been a pupil under Arnold and was appointed by Tait to the staff, remembered his interview. 'There was truth as well as humour in his remark. . . that we had other things to do at Rugby besides exalting the Arnold tradition.'[32]

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As a single man in charge of a school Tait was much in want of a wife. This was especially necessary because at Rugby he was also the housemaster of School House, with seventy boys under his roof and a domestic staff to organise. Charlotte was anxious about how her brother would cope, not least because two of her sons were now in School House. She was determined to make a match.

Seven years before, Catharine Spooner, the sixteen-year-old niece of a friend of Charlotte, had been staying with her at Powick Court, her home in Worcestershire. Tait visited from Balliol and his sister concluded then that 'little Kitty, as she was habitually named, and the young Oxonian suited each other exceedingly well, though his devotion to his books sometimes interfered with his chivalry'.[33] They met again at a dinner party soon after Tait started at Rugby and this time he found her 'most agreeable and extremely pretty'.[34] Kitty's father was persuaded to invite Tait to visit the family during the Christmas holiday. Charlotte wrote to him to say that 'if he chanced to fall in love with Kitty, he need not fear that she would turn out to be a dragon with teeth and claws, – alluding to the sympathy he used to express with the fate of deluded bridegrooms.'[35] At length a letter arrived from her brother: 'Hurrah! I have proposed and have been accepted.'[36]

Catharine was the youngest of two sons and four daughters of William Spooner, Rector of Elmdon, near Rugby, and Archdeacon of Coventry. He was a staunch Evangelical and brother-in-law of William Wilberforce.* Catharine had enjoyed a Jane Austen upbringing, educated piously at home

*. Wilberforce had married Spooner's sister Barbara Ann after a whirlwind romance.

in a quiet country parsonage, close to Elmdon Hall, the Spooners' family seat.* Tensions in the family had arisen after 1838 when Catharine's closest sister Frances married a Tractarian curate, Edward Fortescue. He enthused both his wife and her sisters with his Catholic beliefs and practices. Catharine was thoroughly converted and retained High Church sympathies for the rest of her life. When she heard at the time that among the candidates for Rugby was one of the four Oxford tutors who had protested against Tract 90, she earnestly hoped and prayed that he would not be appointed.

The wedding took place at Elmdon on 22 June 1843, at the end of Tait's first year as headmaster. 'Almighty God!' he wrote succinctly in his journal, 'This is the most important day of my life.'[37] There is no doubt that, like many men of his generation and background, Tait was shy of women and more at ease in the company of men. Catharine was the first and only woman he had courted, and even this would not have happened without his sister's encouragement and his need for help in the school. Nonetheless, their marriage proved to be intimate and supportive from the start, despite their ecclesiastical differences. Indeed, Tait had told Charlotte that 'they held opposite opinions on almost every subject, and had fallen in love with each other in a series of combats over the comparative merits of the Christianity of the middle ages as contrasted with that of the times in which they were living.'[38]

After a summer spent meeting Tait's family, first at Renishaw and then in Scotland, work resumed at Rugby. The hectic life of a boarding school was far from the calm of the rectory, but for Catherine it was, she used to say, the happiest time of her life.[39] She had always possessed extraordinary energy and enthusiasm, which she now devoted to the school, entertaining boys to tea and masters to dinner, supervising the servants, keeping the school accounts, and helping to care for the sick and poor in the town. There was intellectual excitement too, with a stream of visitors from Oxford, and discussions that covered 'every interesting question of politics, and all the latest speculations on theology and philosophy.'[40] Holidays were spent visiting historic sites in Europe: Belgium and the Rhine in 1844, and Naples, Rome and Milan in 1845. Catharine had not travelled further than Scotland before and she absorbed these new experiences, and her husband's explanations, with 'all the enthusiasm of a school-boy'.[41] The births of their first child, Catharine, in 1846, and Mary the following year, brought an end to tours abroad, and summer vacations were now spent staying with their families.

*. The Elmdon estate was bought in 1760 by Catharine's great-grandfather, Abraham Spooner, a Birmingham ironmaster. The Palladian-style Elmdon Hall was completed by his son in 1795 but demolished in 1956.

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1845 and 1847 saw two notorious theological controversies in which Tait felt compelled to intervene. In June 1844 William Ward's *Ideal of a Christian Church* was published, in which his disparagement of the Church of England and his confidence in the Roman Catholic Church went even further than before. Rome was acknowledged as the divinely appointed guardian of religious truth, the work of the Reformation was to be undone, and the English Church was to be restored to its original Catholic character. Ward insisted, however, that when interpreted in what he called a 'non-natural sense', these convictions were still compatible with subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles

It was abundantly clear to the university authorities, however, that Ward's convictions were incompatible with the subscription on which his degrees, ordination and fellowship all depended. He was summoned to appear before the Hebdomadal Board in November and asked to withdraw six of the most extreme passages in the book. He refused, and ten days later the vice-chancellor gave notice of intended proceedings. Convocation (the governing assembly of all doctors and masters of the university) was to be summoned to Oxford on 13 February 1845 to pass a resolution that these passages were inconsistent with the Articles and with Ward's subscription. If passed, a second resolution would deprive Ward of his degrees. An additional measure consisted of a test by which in future the Articles were to be accepted in their original sense, and not, as Stanley put it, 'according to the subtle explanations of the nineteenth century'.[42]

Tait, as a public protester against Tract 90, was expected to endorse these propositions. However, while he was willing to support the first two, he took exception to the third, and to what he saw as its erosion of the Church of England's latitude in matters of belief. He wrote to Jenkyns to persuade him to have the measure withdrawn.* 'I look upon the 3rd proposition (i.e. of the test) with very different feelings from those with which I look upon the two first. I do not myself think it possible that the 3rd prop can pass, as all persons of liberal opinions must, in consistency, vote against it.'[43]

The following day Tait wrote a long letter to the vice-chancellor, which he had published in pamphlet form.† He reiterated his agreement with the first two propositions and his opposition to the third. He explained that

*. Jenkyns was a member of the committee appointed by the Hebdomadal Board to report on Ward's book and advise the university.

†. *A Letter to the Rev. the Vice-Chancellor of The University of Oxford, on the Measures Intended to be Proposed to Convocation on the 13th of Feb, in Connexion with the Case of The Rev. W. G. Ward, M.A.*

times had changed and that there was now 'an almost universal rejection of the 39 Articles and the Book of Common Prayer as infallible'.[44] Evangelicals and Broad Churchmen, as well as Tractarians, were united in disagreement with at least some of the Articles. Furthermore, a latitude within bounds in defining the Church's formularies was to Tait a valuable feature of the Church of England. It was essential therefore to allow for liberty of interpretation when subscribing. The reason Ward was to be punished was because in his case liberty had degenerated into license. To Tait's relief, and much to his credit, the test was withdrawn before convocation assembled, and replaced with a measure designed instead to censure Tract 90.

To some of Tait's Oxford friends the pamphlet was disappointing, and they feared that Rugby was turning him into another Arnoldian liberal. 'Your pamphlet has caused extreme concern to many whose opinions you value', wrote Golightly. 'I cannot tell you how grieved I am.'[45] Ward, on the other hand, thanked Tait for the tone of the pamphlet, and Lake saw in it no change from his previous convictions:

> I think you have acted most rightly and consistently. . . . I really do not see under the circumstances, and in your position, what other you could adopt. The Heads are one and all furious at your advice, 'My dear Mr. Vice-Chancellor' one of the most so. You have indeed, most prudent of men, put your foot into it. I would not be you at your next visit.[46]

Stanley has left a dramatic account of the meeting of convocation:

> At last came the memorable day, which must be regarded as the closing scene of the first Oxford movement. It was February 13, St. Valentine's Eve. It was a day in itself sufficiently marked by the violent passions seething within Oxford itself, and aggravated to the highest pitch by the clergy and laity of all shades and classes, who crowded the colleges and inns of Oxford for the great battle of Armageddon, which was to take place in the Convocation of Oxford that day assembled in the Sheldonian theatre.
>
> The excitement of the day was yet more fiercely accentuated by one of the most tremendous snow storms which had down to that time taken place within the memory of man. Fast and thick fell the flakes amidst the whirlwinds which snatched them up and hurried them to and fro. . . . The undergraduates, who ardently participated in the excitement of their seniors, watched the procession, as it passed under their windows, with mingled howls

> and cheers; and one of them, of more impetuosity than the rest, climbed to the top of the Radcliffe Library, and from that secure position pelted the Vice-Chancellor with a shower of snowballs to testify his detestation of the obnoxious measure.[47]

The proceedings were in Latin, though Ward was permitted to defend himself in English. He spoke for an hour and reminded convocation that it was not there to decide on the merits of his beliefs, but on their consistency or not with his subscription to the Articles. He restated his assent to the dogmas of the Roman Church, and at the same time his readiness to repeat his subscription. The first proposal (the censure of the passages) was carried by 386 votes, and the second (the removal of degrees) by 58 votes. When it came to censuring Tract 90, the proctors exercised their veto and the proposal was removed. Stanley commented on the reverence with which Newman was held: 'Men who had prepared to sacrifice Ward recoiled in horror when they found that they were called upon to sacrifice Newman too.'[48]

As soon as Ward left the Sheldonian he slipped and fell flat on his face in the snow, his papers flying in all directions. He picked himself up and walked back to Balliol with Tait, followed by a large crowd of undergraduates, most of whom regarded Ward's condemnation as outrageously anachronistic and narrow-minded. Tait detested the animosity shown on both sides and wrote to Stanley: 'I saw you at distance on the black Thursday – a dreadful day, full of the most painful thoughts of any day I have known for long, and making me melancholy ever since.'[49]

Ward had already resigned his lectureships at Balliol and now he would have to surrender his fellowship too. Much to his friends' amazement he suddenly announced that he was secretly engaged. The marriage a year later of a man who had advocated clerical celibacy scandalised many of his followers. Jowett likened it to the end of *The Beggar's Opera* when an execution turns into a wedding. Ward's secession to Rome followed in September, anticipating Newman's and Oakeley's the following month, and with them the collapse of at least the first phase of the Oxford Movement.

Tait's defence of the Church of England's liberty in doctrine was summoned again when, in 1847, Renn Dickson Hampden was nominated Bishop of Hereford, and the bitter row from eleven years before was revived. Hampden had been appointed Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford in 1836. Tractarians and many Evangelicals regarded Hampden's liberal opinions as heterodox. His Bampton Lectures in 1832* had seemed to drive

*. Published as *The Scholastic Philosophy considered in its Relations to Christian Theology* (1833).

a wedge between the Bible's revelation and the Church's dogma and creeds, claiming that the latter were not repositories of Christian truth but merely attempts to combat error. Furthermore, a pamphlet in 1834 (*Observations on Religious Dissent*) proved even more provocative, arguing that, if dogmatic theology was not to be trusted, then neither were the Thirty-Nine Articles. Subscription therefore was meaningless, and dissenters could and indeed should be admitted to the university. Much agitation followed, Hampden was accused of denying the Trinity, and convocation was summoned again. Hampden's appointment could not be reversed but at a second assembly in May 1837 a statute was carried, depriving him of two of the duties of his office: the nomination of the university's select preachers* and the doctrinal scrutiny of sermons.

Opposition to Hampden's appointment as bishop was as impassioned as before, though this time it spread beyond Oxford. All the previous theological objections were repeated. The Archbishop of Canterbury† and thirteen bishops (including the new Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce, who was Catharine Tait's cousin) remonstrated against the appointment, the Dean of Hereford wrote a long letter of complaint to the Prime Minister (Lord John Russell), and an urgent protest was signed by numerous clergy. Tait was horrified again at the bitterness of the objections, and was one of 250 members of convocation who signed a counter address. He was not a friend of Hampden (though his sons were at Rugby), and he thought his theology 'frigid and somewhat shallow and uninspiring', but he did not regard him as a heretic, and certainly not as deserving 'scant justice and much unmerited abuse'.[50] He wrote a letter to his brother that shows how conscientious and fair-minded he was in his approach to matters that caused violent reactions in others:

> What do you Scotch people say to the state of the Church of England? . . . I think the opposition to Hampden quite uncalled for and wrong. . . . The whole matter is certainly a very grave one. Lord John would have done much better not to appoint Hampden at first. After he had done so the Bishops were strangely unwise to make their protest, knowing, as they must have done, that Lord John could not draw back with common respectability, and also being well aware that no such grave objections now lay against Hampden as the clamour of a few party men had tried to persuade the world. . . . The most absurd part of the matter is that almost no one has read the book objected to. To be sure, it is very long and

*. Those invited to deliver certain university sermons.

†. William Howley, who had also been Regius Professor of Divinity.

> somewhat dull, but Bishops at least ought to read it. I have re-read it on this occasion with great care, and am fully of opinion that no case of heresy can be made out after the explanations in Hampden's subsequently published writings.[51]

Russell refused, as he put it, to 'sacrifice the reputation of Dr. Hampden, the rights of the Crown, and the true interests of the Church',[52] and Hampden was consecrated bishop in Lambeth Palace Chapel on 26 March 1848.

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In 1846, the year between Ward's degradation and Hampden's nomination, Tait was one of Oxford's select preachers. He was required to give a series of sermons in the university church before a congregation including the vice-chancellor, heads of colleges, fellows and undergraduates. Tait's five sermons were published under the title *Suggestions Offered to the Theological Student under Present Difficulties*. They were aimed at the large number of undergraduates who were intending to be ordained, for which the BA degree, with its compulsory theological components, was still regarded as sufficient preparation.* These students would also have attended lectures given by the five divinity professors.†

Tait's preface explains that the difficulties the students were facing were the errors of what he calls Romanism and Rationalism. In other words, the writings of Ward and others on the one side; and, on the other, the increasing impact of sceptical German theology, with which Tait, with his fluency in German, was more familiar than most. 'What is wanted to meet Infidelity in this country is an English theology, which, fully alive to the peculiar excellencies of our great national Divines, shall thankfully avail itself of the labours of foreigners, while it is still, essentially, our own.'[53] Tait offered this theology in five sermons that commended a critical approach to Scripture alongside a reverence for divine inspiration.

There is, in fact, very little reference to German rationalism except for positive support for a critical historical approach to the Bible. But the ghost of Ward and the outcry he had caused haunt every sermon. So the first on

*. In 1846 over half of Oxford's undergraduates would be ordained. Theological colleges for the training of clergy were only just beginning; Cuddesdon near Oxford opened in 1845.

†. The Lady Margaret Professor, and the Regius Professors of Divinity, Hebrew, Pastoral Theology and Ecclesiastical History. The last two were founded in 1842. All were attached to canonries at Christ Church.

'St John's Gospel the Model of Controversy' explained that John combated the errors of his time, not with dogma, but with the story of a life and an emphasis on love. 'John's example of love is a practical protest. . . against all bitterness or violence even of speaking or writing against those who are in error.'[54] The second explained the fact of 'Variety in Unity' in the Bible, and extolled its virtues in the Church. Two sermons on 'Dangers and Safeguards of the Critical Study of the Bible' warned of the dangers of blind deference to authority, and commended a scholarly study of the Bible that does not forget that it is God's Word. The final sermon, 'Theology Both Old and New', emphasised the importance of theological investigation in order to prevent either scepticism or indifference.

Tait had intended as headmaster to avoid a reputation as a controversialist, political or theological. He was aware of the trouble Arnold had attracted, not least from Rugby's trustees. In 1836, for example, he had written a notoriously vindictive article for the *Edinburgh Review* entitled 'The Oxford Malignants', attacking the Tractarians for their attack on Hampden. This had caused the trustees to vote on whether or not to dismiss him.* Tait had restricted his contribution to the outcry against Ward to a reasonable objection to tightening subscription, and over Hampden, he had remained largely silent, at least in public. Nonetheless, his sympathy with the views of Arnold and many of the Rugby staff reached a wider audience in 1849 when one of the masters, Henry Highton,† published some of his sermons, which were then lambasted in the Tractarian newspaper, *The Guardian.* The reviewer warned the public against the character of the religious teaching at Rugby, claiming that the school had become 'a refuge of heresy and latitudinarianism', and that 'the spirit now paramount in the place is that of a sectarian and a freethinker'.[55] Tait replied to the editor in uncharacteristically scornful terms:

> However indifferent I and my colleagues may be to any personal attacks on ourselves, I feel I ought not lightly to allow this great place of religious education to be vilified. . . . As to the words 'sectarian' and 'latitudinarian', and even 'heretic', I suppose you use them considerately; but I believe that coming from you they will be rightly understood by the public to mean simply that the person to whom these epithets are applied differs from your particular views in interpreting the formularies if the Church of England. . . .

*. The vote was even, and since there was no casting vote, Arnold just survived in post.

†. Highton had been a boy at Rugby under Arnold. In addition to his theological interests he was a pioneer of telegraphy.

> Allow me, sir, to beg that you will consider the injustice you have been guilty of, and let me, as a minister of our common Master, remind you that slander of those who are labouring in His Church, if persisted in, is great wickedness.[56]

This letter was published and the editor replied, expressing his admiration for 'the energy of Dr. Tait's character, his manly straightforwardness in avowing such opinions as he definitely holds, his generosity, and the tone of honour and morality which he has always endeavoured to maintain both as College Tutor and as a Head-master of Rugby'. However, he upheld the criticism of Rugby's 'false and irreligious liberality'.[57]

* * *

Tait's accomplishments as headmaster have been undervalued. His biographers, Randall Davidson and William Benham, were content to offer no more than a few reminiscences of what they describe as 'a life so necessarily monotonous as that of a Head-master of a public school'.[58] As an outsider, Jowett reckoned that Rugby 'was never more successful than under his administration'.[59] Lake, of course, was biased, and thought that, while 'the happiest time of his life', it was 'the least marked period of Tait's career. . . . As the head-master of a public school he was hardly a success. He succeeded a man of real genius and extraordinary force of character, by far the greatest teacher of his day.' Tait's efforts were bound to be overshadowed by Arnold's, and this was exacerbated by the publication of Stanley's popular biography* at the end of his second year. However, his achievements were considerable, and lay in skilfully balancing a genuine if diplomatic loyalty to Arnold's vision with a determination to modernise and improve. Certainly, if numbers were a sign of success, Tait's eight years as headmaster were impressive, with the school roll increasing from 400 to nearly 500, though some of this success must have been due to Arnold's posthumous prestige created by Stanley. Nonetheless, with higher numbers came improvements. Gas lighting was installed and health concerns were remedied, with an overhaul of sanitation, better ventilation in the chapel, and a new sanatorium. Once this work had been completed, a library and museum were added, and a new memorial transept extended the chapel.

One of Arnold's most important reforms at Rugby had been his transformation of the prefect system. At Winchester, where he had been a pupil, the praeposters (prefects) were often the most athletic boys, to whom much of the running of the school was delegated. Instead at Rugby Arnold

*. *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold, D.D.* (1844).

made the thirty clever boys of the sixth form the praeposters. Furthermore, he used the daily contact that his teaching provided to encourage them to spread his moral influence in the school. 'He endeavoured', wrote Stanley, 'to make them feel that they were actually fellow-workers with him for the highest good of the school, upon the highest principles and motives.'[60] But this also had its dangers, making the boys anxious and earnest. Lake described Arnold's effect as 'electric and overpowering. . . it was more than *boys'* nature could stand; coming on them prematurely, infusing priggishness rather than principle. . . it took five years to recover from the mental and moral distortion which it involved'.[61] Tait had observed this weakness in his Rugby pupils at Balliol, and as headmaster he succeeded in lightening the burden, as Arthur Butler explained:*

> No one can have read Arnold's Life without being struck by his deep, perhaps excessive, feeling of the evil incident to school life, and by the part which the Praeposters were called upon to play in the moral government of the School. . . . It produced strained and often hostile relations between the Sixth and the rest of the School, and it reacted in many cases injuriously on the character of these boy-masters, making them self-important and unnatural. This condition of things Tait did much to alter. In the first place, he regulated the authority of the Sixth, fixing limits to their power of inflicting punishment, and giving a right of appeal to any lower boy who felt himself aggrieved. Secondly, he did away with certain old customs, thought by the Sixth privileges, which did no good, but only caused friction and annoyance in the School. And lastly, while impressing upon the Sixth their duties and responsibilities with weighty, and often eloquent words, he never failed also to make them see that there was a right and a wrong way of doing things, and that it was quite possible to be strict and firm without being high-flown and aggravating.[62]

* * *

There is no doubt that Tait worked as hard as ever during his time at Rugby. He made frequent references in his journal to fatigue, and with it his persistent anxiety about illness and death, which was exacerbated by the strains of running the school. 'Unless we live here in daily expectation of death, death will take us unawares', he wrote in 1844.[63] And the next day,

*. Butler was a boy in School House during Tait's last years, and after returning to Rugby to teach, was the first Master of Haileybury.

'Grant O Lord that my slight illness and these thoughts of death which it has brought me may make me more ready to leave this world when thou dost call.'[64]

In February 1848 Tait contracted rheumatic fever, which left him with permanent damage to his heart and lungs. He was so unwell that he was not alone in thinking he was dying. His brothers and sisters were summoned and he said his farewells. On Ash Wednesday, 8 March, he was expected to die at any moment. He dictated a message to be given to the praeposters in School House. 'Say to them with my love and blessing, as a dying man, that I make it my last and particular request to them that they will each of them find some regular stated time every day for reading the Bible and praying in their studies. . . and that they will exert themselves as praeposters to induce the other boys to do the same for my sake.'[65] Despite a near fatal fit of coughing, Tait survived the day, and by Easter he was recovering slowly, though (as he accurately recorded) 'my health was much shattered for life'.[66]

Tait had never been a natural schoolmaster and had not found it easy to relate to his pupils. Butler described his teaching, sermons and administration as 'all good and sensible, but somewhat cold and repressive; of a kind rather to create respect and confidence than affection and admiration'.[67] His illness, however, seems to have drawn out of the boys a surprising concern and affection. Butler recalled a moment of rebellion in the school that collapsed as soon as the rebels remembered the headmaster on his sickbed. 'The thought that he would hear us, and that the knowledge of what was happening would be bad for him, acted as an instant sedative.'[68] He recalled too the first time Tait ventured outside:

> It was on a warm summer day when we were playing cricket in the Close that his well-known, stately form was seen, supported by Mrs. Tait, walking under the elms. Instantly every bat and ball was laid aside, and such a cheer arose and again repeated. It was the beginning of a wholly new relation between boys and master. It was the first expression of a popularity which went on increasing till he left us, and which, I believe, has been rarely equalled in any public school. . . . He was always rather the statesman than the schoolmaster, the ruler than the friend. But everything between us took a warmer tone. We had been drawn to him in his illness; we understood him better.[69]

After convalescence at Charlotte's house, Tait was keen to return to work, or soon, he told her, 'I shall think there is nothing in the world so interesting as the beating of my own heart'.[70] But he collapsed again in

July and spent the summer holiday in Broadstairs on the Isle of Thanet, recommended for its bracing air. He was back in Rugby for the start of the autumn term and resumed most of his duties. But he was never again strong enough for the workload and he continued to complain about his health.

It was a considerable relief to his friends when, a year later, Tait received a letter from the Prime Minister offering to submit his name to the Queen for the vacant deanery of Carlisle. 'I should be unwilling', he wrote, 'to deprive Rugby of the advantage it derives from your superintendence, had I not been assured that your health is scarcely equal to the labour which the direction of a great school imposes.'[71] The deanery had been offered first to Stanley, not least as a tribute to his deceased father who was to be succeeded as Bishop of Norwich by the present dean, Samuel Hinds. When Stanley turned it down he urged Russell to consider Tait, and was delighted when his advice was taken.[72]

Although Tait was pleased at the prospect of being closer to Scotland and his family, he was disappointed that his weakness had prevented a more prestigious preferment, and he accepted only when his doctor insisted. Catharine was sorry to leave Rugby, where her life had been happy and full of interest, and where she had been near her family and friends at Elmdon. Charlotte's account of their leave-taking at Easter 1850 describes regret too on the part of school and town, evidently mixed with admiration:

> There was a grand assemblage in the great hall of the school, and the inhabitants of the town, the school, the masters, the sixth form, the School-house, each presented memorial offerings, and a touching one was made to Mrs Tait by those pupils who had been, but were no longer, at Rugby, who now sent a deputation to present to her a picture of her husband by Richmond.* The scene on the day of departure was almost overwhelming, Archie still so delicate, the whole school, five hundred boys with all the masters, and many people of the town, surrounded their carriage; the horses were not allowed to remain, and the boys drew it through the streets down the hill to the station. The occasion was sad yet the excitement of the boys vented itself, boy-like, in loud hurrahs while yet they crowded round him to express their sorrow at his departure.[73]

*. See Illustrations, p. XX.