



ARCHBISHOP RANDALL DAVIDSON

Michael Hughes

Archbishop Randall Davidson

Randall Davidson was Archbishop of Canterbury for quarter of a century from 1903 to 1928. Davidson was a product of the Victorian ecclesiastical and social establishment, whose advance through the Church was dependent on the patronage of Queen Victoria, but he became Archbishop at a time of huge social and political change. He guided the Church of England through the turbulence of the Edwardian period, when it faced considerable challenges to its status as the Established Church and helped to shape its response to the horrors of the First World War. Davidson inherited a Church of England that was sharply divided on a range of issues, and he devoted his career as Archbishop to securing its unity, whilst ensuring that its voice continued to be heard both nationally and internationally. A modest and pragmatic man, he was widely respected both within the Church and beyond, helping to find solutions to a range of political and ecclesiastical problems. This book explores Davidson's role within the Church and in the life of Britain more broadly during his time at Canterbury. It includes a large selection of documents that help both to reveal the Archbishop's character and to cast light on the way in which he carried out his demanding duties.

Michael Hughes is Professor of History and Head of Department at Lancaster University. He has published a book and numerous articles on Nonconformity in the twentieth century, as well as writing extensively on Anglo-Russian relations, with a particular emphasis on relations between Anglicanism and Orthodoxy (a subject with which Randall Davidson was particularly concerned). He was for many years a Lay Reader in the Anglican Church and has published five monographs and more than thirty articles in scholarly journals.

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Preface

Randall Davidson has intrigued me for many years. The man who served as Archbishop of Canterbury between 1903 and 1928 has featured on the periphery of a number of my previous research projects, yet has somehow remained, at least to me, a curiously elusive figure. Davidson is familiar to anyone interested in the fitful series of informal Anglican–Orthodox dialogues that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. He also comes within the purview of students of Anglo–Russian relations, given his attempts to intervene on behalf of Russian clergy following the 1917 Revolution, as well as for his role in supporting the dispatch of aid to alleviate famine in Russia in 1918–19. Any historian who has studied the history of Britain during the First World War can similarly not fail to be aware of Davidson’s sterling efforts to balance the demands of patriotism and the moral imperative to avoid an unreasoning hatred of the enemy. The Archbishop also naturally features in any history of the Church of England, not as a gifted theologian or charismatic preacher, but rather as a cautious yet well-regarded ecclesiastical bureaucrat who helped to guide the Church of England through 25 turbulent years of change and challenge.

And yet, despite George Bell’s massive biography, first published in 1935, Davidson is not really a familiar figure beyond a comparative small number of Church historians. It is for this reason that I am grateful to Dr Andrew Chandler for encouraging me to write this book, which has given me the opportunity to try to better understand such an elusive quarry. I have come to Davidson from what is perhaps a rather unusual perspective: that of an international historian, whose interest in Davidson was prompted by my interest in understanding the Archbishop’s attitudes towards the wider world, rather than as a student of the Church of England. And, as an historian of international history, I have long been interested in Davidson’s ‘pragmatism’, which appears in these pages as a form of Realism rooted both in a belief in the virtues of compromise *and* a recognition of the challenge of uncritically applying a universal ethic to the recalcitrant world of human society. As someone who has down the years written a good deal on Russian Orthodoxy, I am also naturally inclined to make parallels between such ideas and the virtues of an apophatic theology sceptical about the extent to which divine revelation can serve as an

unproblematic foundation for human action (although such a position is hardly unknown in the Western churches either). I have nevertheless endeavoured to keep these interests 'behind the scenes' in the text that follows – except perhaps in the conclusion – conscious that most readers will be more interested in a straightforward account of the 'life and times' of Randall Davidson.

I have taken every opportunity over the past few years to rummage through archives and libraries up and down Britain to help deepen my understanding of Davidson. The Reading Room staff at Lambeth Palace Library have been unfailingly courteous and cheerful as I ordered up a mountain of books and files. I have also benefitted greatly from the help of staff at the Borthwick Library (York), the Bodleian Library, the British Library, the British Library of Economic and Political Science, Lancaster University Library, the Library of Senate House (London), and the Sidney Jones Library (University of Liverpool). I am grateful to Sally Mills, who was once again kind enough to take the time to help turn my leaden prose into something more readable. I should also thank my colleagues at Lancaster for putting up with an increasingly irascible head of Department during the final stages of preparing this manuscript. The same goes for my wife, Katie. Once again, this book is dedicated to my parents Anne and John Hughes.



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Introduction

In 1935, George Bell published his massive two-volume biography of Randall Davidson, who served as Archbishop of Canterbury from 1903 to 1928.¹ Bell had worked for many years as the Archbishop's Chaplain, and his biography was based on an exhaustive survey of the voluminous archival material, as well as first-hand knowledge of many of the people and events described in the book. He included numerous extracts from Davidson's private letters and memoranda, giving readers an insight into the character and outlook of the man who headed the Church of England for a quarter of a century, having previously served as Dean of Windsor and, successively, Bishop of Rochester and Winchester. Bell's biography was no simple exercise in hagiography, but it was permeated by the author's affection and admiration for his old mentor. It was also shaped by his friendship with the Archbishop's widow Edith, along with others who had known Davidson well, and expressed definite ideas about how they wanted him to be remembered.²

The picture of Davidson that emerges in the pages of Bell's book is an unambiguously positive one. The Archbishop was represented as a man of great personal integrity and industry, who tempered his ambition with a genuine sense of modesty, devoting his energies to defending the position of the Church of England in national life, whilst soothing away its internal divisions through the patient use of quiet diplomacy. Nor was such a portrait a controversial one. The journalist and *Church Times* editor Sidney Dark had already published a book in 1929 about *Archbishop Davidson and the English Church*, which praised Davidson as 'a great man' who was, in 'purity of character' and 'steadfastness of purpose', superior to most of his contemporaries in Church and State.³ The writer and social reformer Harold Begbie commended Davidson for exemplifying 'order, decency and good temper'.⁴ Few other writers showed any desire to challenge the image of an 'esteemed Archbishop'.⁵ When Davidson died in 1930, both published obituaries and private letters of sympathy paid tribute to a man who had throughout his life impressed those he met with his kindness and humility.

A few shadows inevitably appeared in some of the accounts of Davidson written by his contemporaries – often expressed as a kind of counterpoise to the paean of praise for his innate caution and decency. Dark suggested that the Archbishop lacked 'audacity', something which he attributed in part to the fact

2 Introduction

that he began life as a 'courtier' (Davidson had, as Dean of Windsor, been close to Queen Victoria). Begbie described the Archbishop as 'an admirable judge if an indifferent advocate'.⁶ One former Anglican Bishop thought that Davidson had too often been 'led by circumstances'.⁷ Bell himself acknowledged that there were occasions when the Archbishop's judgement deserted him, most notably towards the end of his career, when ill health and fatigue made him an increasingly detached figure. Davidson also naturally faced numerous criticisms throughout his long archiepiscopate, whether from Nonconformists angry at the privileged position of the Church of England in national life, or Anglo-Catholics irritated by his readiness to accept the right of Parliament to legislate in ecclesiastical matters. Such criticisms were, nevertheless, the exception rather than the rule. Even those who disagreed with him more often than not went out of the way to praise his generosity of spirit. Nor was Bell's positive account of Davidson simply a reflection of the close relationship between the two men. It is impossible, even after the passage of eighty years, not to admire his biography both as a model of scholarship and a vital source of information about the man who served as Archbishop of Canterbury for longer than any of his post-Reformation predecessors. All of which raises the question of why there is a need for any new assessment of the career of Randall Davidson.

The first answer, as anyone who has perused all 1,400 pages of Bell's massive account of Davidson will know, is that its sheer scale makes it a difficult read for all but the most determined. It is in many ways as much a work of reference as a biography. And, whilst generally full in its account of Davidson's life, Bell was at times notably discreet when discussing his subject's views on individuals ranging from Queen Victoria to David Lloyd George. He was also reticent when discussing such topics as the relationship between Davidson's sister-in-law Lucy Tait, daughter of Archbishop Archibald Tait, and Mary Benson, widow of Archbishop Edward Benson. Such discretion is quite in order when writing about a well-known figure, except in so far as their private life and opinions have ramifications for their public role (it is an approach followed throughout this book).⁸ Of greater significance here, perhaps, is the question of Bell's interpretation of Davidson's long ecclesiastical career.

The Archbishop's erstwhile Chaplain began researching his book soon after Davidson's death. Whilst the idea that chronological distance creates the foundations of a nuanced perspective is often little more than a reflection of the historian's vanity, Bell certainly acted as a 'participant-observer' in many of the events he wrote about, to use one of the more tiresome phrases of modern sociology. Bell played an important role in shaping the Archbishop's policy on a variety of questions, most notably the various ecumenical initiatives that developed after 1918, in response to the horrors of the First World War. By the time he wrote his book about Davidson, Bell was himself an important figure in the Church of England, having been appointed Bishop of Chichester in 1929. Many of the issues that had concerned the Archbishop continued to preoccupy senior figures in the Church throughout the decade that followed. It should not

therefore be a matter of surprise that the Davidson who emerges in Bell's book is very much Bell's Davidson.

None of this is to say that Bell was a prisoner of his own prejudices and beliefs (at least no more than any of us are). It is, rather, simply to note that his book was written in the tradition of authorised and semi-authorised inter-war biographies of 'great men'. Such works generally assume that the correct way to recall a 'Life' is to trace how the individual subject navigated their way through the events they encountered in the course of their career. The very nature of biography requires a focus on the central character. Such a perspective is entirely reasonable, but perhaps requires a caveat that both author and reader should be aware of the danger that the agency of 'their' man or woman can easily be exaggerated, whilst the complexity and contradictions of history can too readily be lost through the simple act of concentrating on a single individual. It is certainly a caveat that the reader of this book should keep firmly in mind. Davidson himself was acutely aware that he was not master of all he surveyed. Like most of those who reach the top of any organisation – political, economic, or ecclesiastical – the Archbishop understood the limitations of his authority. His strength lay, indeed, in recognising that his most important role was to seek agreement between those who disagreed rather than trying to resolve divisions by imposing his own will.

Perhaps the main theme of this account of Randall Davidson's life is that he was (as Edward Carpenter has noted) essentially a Victorian in outlook,⁹ who found himself responsible for guiding the Church of England through the perilous challenges of a multifaceted modernity. Davidson was born in 1848, the year when the revolutions that broke out across Europe briefly threatened the multinational empires whose roots stretched far back into the medieval period. He died in 1930, shortly after the Stock Market crash, which so damaged the global economy that it paved the way for the rise of Hitler and the growth of international tensions that exploded in the Second World War. Or, to focus more narrowly on literary landmarks, Davidson was born at a time when Charles Dickens' *Dombey and Son* was still being serialised, and died in the year that D. H. Lawrence first published *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (albeit not in Britain). None of this is to say that the Archbishop was born into a settled society with a common outlook on matters social and cultural. He was after all only 11 years old when Charles Darwin published his *Origin of Species*, destined to have a huge impact on the development of both scientific culture and religious belief in the decades that followed. Nor is it to assume that the Victorian era was a settled period of British history that endured until blown apart by the challenges of the new twentieth century: it was instead a time of massive social and economic development, ranging from industrialisation and urbanisation at home to the growth of the British Empire abroad. It is, however, indisputable that Davidson served as Archbishop during a period of great change in both the ecclesiastical and secular spheres. Much of his time at Canterbury was spent responding to the complex brew of shifting problems that emerged within the Church of England and more generally across British society.

The chapters that follow are organised both thematically and chronologically. The first chapter briefly reviews Davidson's career in the years before his appointment to Canterbury, examining how, from early in his ecclesiastical career, he was a member of the Victorian 'Establishment', his advance up the Church hierarchy rooted as much in the patronage of the Queen as in his own undoubted aptitudes and abilities. Although keen to look at the world from beyond the confines of his particular standpoint, Davidson imbibed from Archbishop Tait (whom he served as Chaplain) the idea that the Church of England was a National Church, whose senior figures had a responsibility to engage with social and political issues. He was nevertheless increasingly aware that the growing strength of Nonconformity meant that it was becoming impossible for the Church of England to assume its position in public life was unassailable. Whilst Davidson was most at home in private discussion with royals and politicians and Bishops, he was even before arriving at Canterbury convinced that the Church of England needed to be seen to earn its position as the Established Church. He was also aware that its internal divisions – flowing from the chasm between 'High' and 'Low' Churchmen that had developed following the rise of the Oxford Movement in the 1840s – could pose a danger to both its unity and authority. By the time he went to Canterbury in 1903, Davidson was already convinced that one of his most important tasks was to manage the tensions within the Church of England, whilst using his access to members of the political establishment to ensure that it continued to exercise influence in the corridors of power.

The next two chapters then examine Davidson's archiepiscopate during the years between 1903 and 1914. Chapter 2 examines his involvement in the major political controversies of the day – State control of education, the Parliamentary crisis of 1909–11, the Irish Home Rule crisis – during which the Archbishop worked hard to defend the influence of the Church of England, whilst seeking to broker compromise between senior political figures. His *modus operandi* was rooted in a belief that the Church needed to acknowledge the social and political changes embedded in the Liberal ascendancy, which followed the 1906 General Election, working with the grain of the times to prevent the Church's marginalisation as a site of authority in England and Wales. Chapter 3 then examines the internal tensions within the Church of England that Davidson had to deal with during his first ten years at Canterbury, ranging from the bitter divisions over Ritualism to debates about overseas mission work, as well as exploring the Archbishop's efforts to build closer ties between the provinces of the worldwide Anglican Communion. These challenges did not of course present themselves in neat sequential fashion. They instead formed part of the elusive yet tangible Edwardian Crisis, characterised by growing anxiety about threats to traditional patterns of authority and privilege, accompanied by an uneasy sense that the imagined certainties of the Victorian Age had been left far behind.

Chapter 4 examines Davidson's career during the First World War – a conflict traditionally seen as marking a kind of *caesura* in historical development, as

the technological and social realities of total war blew away the assumptions and values of a more innocent age. The idea that the First World War represented a dramatic rupture has long been questioned by historians, not least because the Edwardian Crisis itself seemed to represent a break with the Victorian past, whilst in the years after 1918 the continuities with the pre-war years were in some ways as marked as the changes. The war nevertheless created new challenges for the Church of England, ranging from the need to supply chaplains at the Front and comfort to the bereaved at home, to the ethical conundrums raised by the use of poisonous gas and the demands for retaliation against German 'atrocities'. The familiar idea that the Church of England served as a kind of recruiting arm of the State, stridently endorsing the morality of the war, has become something of an historical cliché down the years. The reality was more complex, and Davidson himself took a quiet but determined lead in criticising the use of gas and the harsh treatment of conscientious objectors, even though he was fundamentally committed to the idea that Britain was fighting a virtuous war against tyranny.

Davidson continued to focus a good deal on internal Church affairs during the war, not least the on-going tension created by the commitment of some leading figures to a 'Modernism' that seemed to call into question many traditional doctrines. He also fretted about how a brutal war could have erupted between Christian nations who supposedly shared certain fundamental values. It is a cliché to suggest that the ecumenical movement was created by the First World War (its origins can be dated back much further). There is, though, no doubt that both the bloodshed and the shared experience of the trenches helped to fuel calls for the various denominations to work more closely with one another. Chapter 5 focuses on Davidson's role after 1918 in the burgeoning ecumenical movement. The Archbishop was committed to the principle of ecumenism, but much of his time was in practice spent trying to manage the tensions it created, since discussion of building closer relations with other churches at home and abroad necessarily raised questions about the nature of the Church of England itself. The final two chapters then consider how Davidson sought to maintain the national role of the Church of England in the final decades of his archiepiscopate. Chapter 6 examines how Davidson found himself increasingly at odds during the 1920s with a younger generation of clergy and lay people, led by the likes of William Temple and R. H. Tawney, who wanted the Church of England to use its influence to help place social and economic life in Britain on a new ethical foundation. Chapter 7 explores the growth of tensions within the Church of England leading up the debacle of 1927–28, when Parliament refused to approve the new Prayer Book, threatening to lead to a crisis in Church-State relations. At the heart of many of these developments was the nature of Establishment itself. Davidson himself was no Erastian, believing instead that the relationship of Church and State should be one of organic harmony, but he was also temperamentally unsympathetic to those who believed that the Church of England should use its position to call for fundamental social and economic reforms. One of the curiosities of

Davidson's life is, indeed, that he managed to be passionately committed to the principle of Establishment, whilst struggling to articulate both its character and its role in determining the Church of England's position in national life.

Davidson's reaction in the face of many of these developments often reflected his puzzlement at the position of those whose outlook on life was rooted in a passionate commitment to specific doctrines and practices. He was well aware that his defence of the comprehensive character of the Church of England made some look on him with suspicion as a latitudinarian, unwilling to set boundaries to the permitted beliefs of professing Anglicans. The charge was not altogether true – although there can be little doubt that the Archbishop's reluctance to support definite rulings on disciplinary and doctrinal issues was sometimes prompted by his concern that such action would only worsen division. Davidson's Anglicanism was not primarily a matter of doctrine. It was also shaped by a combination of reason and faith allied with an acute awareness of the past as a source of wisdom and a possible constraint on change. He was by instinct inclined to include rather than exclude. It was for this reason that he was ready to ordain William Temple in 1910 and consecrate Hensley Henson as Bishop of Hereford in 1918, even though their views on doctrine were seen by many as heterodox, and deeply inconsistent with traditional Christian (let alone Anglican) teaching on issues ranging from the Incarnation through to miracles. The fluidity of the Archbishop's vision of Anglicanism meant that he found it easy to support ecumenical initiatives, and discount doctrinal squabbles, since he was not convinced of the theological importance of the issues that so exercised many of his contemporaries. Any study of Davidson does, indeed, need to engage with the problem of defining the fine line that separates open-mindedness from lack of conviction. This book – like Bell's biography – suggests that Davidson's commitment to maintaining the Church of England as a broad Church was rooted both in pragmatism *and* a deeper sense that the Anglican tradition was one that should accommodate a wide range of outlooks and beliefs.

It is perhaps worth saying a few words about the vexed relationship between modernisation and secularisation, which has so preoccupied historians and theologians in recent years, and is a theme that inevitably recurs in the pages that follow. Davidson, throughout his 25 years at Canterbury, seldom fretted about the prospect of Britain ceasing to be a Christian nation – but he was intensely concerned about preserving the Church of England's place in a country where millions of men and women belonged to other denominations. He also understood that the changing temper of the times was transforming what might be termed the character of Christian culture. The decline of the rituals of the English Sunday, the development of cinema as a medium of mass entertainment, the growing circulation of popular newspapers – all these were both a hallmark and a source of the gentle retreat of Christianity from the heart of national life. The Church of England was not necessarily in decline, but it was confronting significant changes in the character of popular religion, even if these can be hard to delineate. The term *weltanschauung* – that nebulous 'spirit

of the age' – is perhaps best avoided as a term of historical analysis since its content lies so much in the eye of the beholder. And yet the Britain of 1928, the year Davidson left Canterbury, was fundamentally different from the Britain of 1903 when he arrived. Some of the changes were objective: full adult suffrage, the growth of light industry and the consumer society, and the development of radio and other mass media. Others were less tangible, ranging from the rise of the 'flapper' to the appearance of fiction that dealt with issues of morality in ways that would have been almost unthinkable at the start of the twentieth century. It was through the changing contours of this landscape that Davidson had to guide the Church of England for quarter of a century.

Alert readers of this book will notice how hard it is to break free altogether from the shadows of Bell's massive biography of Davidson. Nor is this necessarily a problem given the very real strengths of his work. Bell was adept at identifying correspondence and memoranda of particular value. He was also generally fair-minded and balanced in his selection. There were nevertheless times when Bell edited particular documents in ways that distorted their significance (most frequently by removing some of Davidson's more impatient judgements about the people he met both within and beyond the Church of England). It is for this reason that I have in almost all cases – with the partial exception of Chapter 1 – returned to the original documents (whether in Davidson's own papers at Lambeth Palace or in other collections of archival and printed sources). Readers who are familiar with the academic literature will also note that I have tried, where possible, to locate Davidson's life and career within the scholarly debates that have flourished in recent years over such questions as the 'decline' of the Church of England and the putative growth of a secular society in Britain. I have, however, deliberately avoided dwelling on these debates within the text itself, mindful that many readers will not be familiar with the literature, and are in any case more interested in understanding both Davidson himself and his time as Archbishop. The work of scholars such as Simon Green, Callum Brown, Matthew Grimley, John Kent, Stuart Mews, and Melanie Barber has profoundly shaped my understanding of the religious landscape of early twentieth-century Britain. Their influence has hopefully received due acknowledgement in the references. The same is true of countless other scholars who have written on subjects ranging from the controversy over Ritualism through to the nature and significance of the ecumenical movement. Although this book is based on a large number of primary sources, it is also a work of interpretation and synthesis, designed to make accessible to a new audience a man – Randall Davidson – who has been largely forgotten except by those who have a particular interest in Church History.

The idea of 'Church History' is itself one that perhaps requires a brief discussion. One of the main themes in the scholarly literature over the past few decades has been to break down the idea that the history of religion in twentieth-century Britain can in some way be understood apart from wider social changes. Keith Robbins, Simon Green, and Matthew Grimley – along with many others – have devoted enormous energy to showing how the shifting

landscape of religion in modern Britain has formed part of a complex tapestry of social, political, and cultural change. One of the most striking features of Davidson's time at Canterbury is, indeed, the extent to which the Archbishop recognised that the Church had to engage with a changing world or risk marginalisation. The following chapters in practice tend to divide between those that deal with 'Church' issues and others that consider 'social and political' questions. Such a distinction is, in a sense, misleading, even if it has the advantage of allowing the material to be presented in a way that makes it more accessible to readers who are not well versed in the subject. The bitter divisions over such issues as Ritualism and the revised Prayer Book erupted into the public domain precisely because the boundary between the secular and the religious was extremely fluid. The 'Protestant' character of the Church of England was for many Britons not simply a question of doctrine and ceremony. It was also a matter of national identity – something that encapsulated the meaning of British history over three centuries. The interaction between the porous spheres of Church, State, and Society is, indeed, a central theme throughout this book.

It is worth ending with a note on the origins of my own interest in Davidson, which developed out of a long-standing interest in two perhaps seemingly unrelated topics: the history of Anglican–Orthodox relations and the rise of a Christian Realist tradition that treats war as an inevitable if tragic aspect of the human condition.¹⁰ Davidson is a familiar figure to anyone interested in relations between Anglicanism and Orthodoxy.¹¹ He also looms large in the consciousness of anyone who has studied the role of the churches in the First World War and its aftermath. Yet except for those who are specialists in the history of the Anglican Communion, Davidson seems a curiously elusive figure, despite occupying the See of Canterbury for quarter of a century. He seldom attracts more than a few references in political histories of the period, even though he was on close terms with generations of political leaders. And, whilst he was the most influential figure in the Anglican Communion over several decades,¹² he is even eclipsed in many histories of the Church, outshone by more charismatic or intellectually influential figures such as William Temple and Charles Gore. Davidson did not leave a clear 'legacy', precisely because his career was largely devoted to accommodating competing interests in an uncertain and changing world. He was not a heroic figure. And yet, as is perhaps too little realised, there is often great wisdom in focusing on immediate and practical objectives, eschewing the abstract and teleological in favour of the underestimated virtues of compromise and agreement. Davidson once praised Archbishop Tait for his 'half-conscious protest against the excited restlessness and fuss so familiar in modern clerical circles'.¹³ Much of Davidson's own time at Canterbury was spent trying to bring order to a world of 'excited restlessness'.

Notes

- 1 The edition referred to throughout this book is George Bell, *Randall Davidson: Archbishop of Canterbury* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938).

- 2 For useful material about the writing of Bell's biography of Davidson, see Lambeth Palace Library, Bell Papers, in particular Vols 221 and 222, which contain extensive correspondence between Bell and Edith Davidson and Bell and Mary Mills (Davidson's secretary).
- 3 Sidney Dark, *Archbishop Davidson and the English Church* (New York: William Morrow, 1929), p. v.
- 4 Harold Begbie, *Painted Windows: A Study in Religious Personality* (London: Mills and Boon, 1922), p. 182.
- 5 Charles Herbert, *Twenty Five Years as Archbishop of Canterbury* (London: Wells, Gardner, Darnton, 1929).
- 6 Begbie, *Painted Windows*, p. 185.
- 7 Bell Papers 225, fos. 156–62, Knox, 'An Appreciation of Archbishop Davidson'.
- 8 For a discussion of the complex family lives of the Taits and Bensons, see Rodney Bolt, *As Good as God, as Clever as the Devil: The Impossible Life of Mary Benson* (London: Atlantic Books, 2011).
- 9 Edward Carpenter, 'Randall Davidson, The Last of the Victorians', in Carpenter (ed), *Cantuar: The Archbishops in Their Office* (London: Cassel, 1971), pp. 408–44.
- 10 See, for example, Michael Hughes, *Conflict and Conscience: Methodism, Peace and War in the Twentieth Century* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2008); Michael Hughes, *Beyond Holy Russia: The Life and Times of Stephen Graham* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2014).
- 11 See, for example, the discussion of Davidson's role in the Anglican–Orthodox dialogue in Bryn Geffert, *Eastern Orthodox and Anglicans: Diplomacy, Theology and the Politics of Interwar Ecumenism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).
- 12 Stuart Mews, 'Randall Thomas Davidson', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
- 13 Randall Davidson and William Benham, *Life of Archibald Campbell Tait: Archbishop of Canterbury* (London: Macmillan, 1891), 2 vols., Vol. 2, p. 563.

1 The making of an Archbishop

Early years

Randall Davidson was born in 1848 into a prosperous Edinburgh family.¹ His father ran a successful timber-importing business in Leith. His mother was the daughter of a prominent Borders family. Davidson later recalled that his mother's 'real absorption in the religious side of life' was 'a natural thing' that shaped the outlook of her children:

I do not find it easy to explain the remarkable influence which my mother was able to exercise over and among us in all religious matters and in Bible teaching [. . .] I think her poetic temperament [. . .] gave her a power of putting things in a way that made them interesting at the moment and rememberable afterwards.²

Davidson was himself baptised into the Church of Scotland – his paternal grandfather and great-grandfather had been Church of Scotland ministers – but his upbringing was, according to his own reckoning, 'very undenominational [. . .] I have no recollection of receiving any teaching upon Churchmanship, either Episcopal or Presbyterian, the religion taught us being wholly of the personal sort, but beautiful in its simplicity and reality'.³ Davidson never understood in later life the passion that matters of doctrine and liturgy exercised on so many who belonged to his generation – a reflection perhaps of his upbringing in a home where such things were deemed less important than a faith based on personal devotion and moral rectitude.

Davidson developed early in life a love of countryside and rural sports that stayed with him for the rest of his life (as Archbishop he continued to shoot and fish well into his seventies).⁴ When his family moved in 1857 to a new home called Muirhouse, a large Gothic house surrounded by 200 acres of parkland, the young Randall spent much of his time shooting and riding his pony. He was taught at home until the age of 12, when he was sent away to a private school near Nottingham, before moving on to Harrow at the age of 14. The choice of Harrow does not seem to have reflected any great desire on the part of his parents to educate their son into the ethos of the British Establishment,

for his father knew little of the values and cultures of the various public schools, but the decision was to play an important role in Davidson's life. He retained a strong loyalty to the school far into adulthood.⁵ Davidson admired the new Headmaster, the Rev. Henry Montagu Butler, although some of his contemporaries were subsequently more inclined to recall Butler's penchant for using the cane.⁶ He was still more influenced by his housemaster, the Rev. B. F. Westcott, later to become Bishop of Durham, and a man remembered by Davidson as 'the Prophet to whom we looked for intellectual guidance on every subject'.⁷ Davidson was complimentary about the education he received at Harrow. His letters home discussing the sermons he heard in Chapel suggest he had little interest in abstruse theological questions, instead favouring more accessible addresses that focused on particular Biblical texts and their relevance for human conduct.⁸ Davidson preferred, even as a schoolboy, to concentrate on the immediate and concrete rather than the mystical and remote.

The last year at Harrow was punctuated by an incident that had consequences for the rest of Davidson's life, when a friend accidentally shot him in the back whilst out shooting rabbits. Davidson spent months convalescing, and the accident left him with injuries that caused pain down until his death. He was cursed by ill health throughout his life – a weakness that was in part physical, but may also have reflected his perennial tendency to work himself into a state of nervous exhaustion. The shooting accident also had a more immediate effect, since it destroyed any chance of winning a scholarship to Oxford, although he still matriculated in the autumn of 1867 as a commoner at Trinity College. Davidson was already certain that he wanted to be ordained. It may be that the prospect of a clerical career – and the secure income it offered – appealed to a young man from a prosperous but not hugely wealthy upper-middle class background. His letters home from both Harrow and Oxford do, though, suggest that he possessed a faith that was strong if oddly unreflective in character.⁹ Davidson was certainly largely oblivious to the great theological controversies of the day during his time at university (although he did show a lively interest in local ecclesiastical tensions and rivalries).¹⁰ Neither the vexed questions posed by the legacy of the Oxford Movement, nor the challenge offered by Darwinism to traditional belief, evoked much interest in the mind of a young man whose faith was instinctive rather than cerebral in character. Whilst T. H. Green was already teaching at Oxford, Davidson was at university too early to come under his influence, or more generally the broad school of British Idealism that had such a powerful sway on a later generation of Anglican clergy (and indeed on some of Davidson's own contemporaries).¹¹ Nor is there much evidence that he had any real interest in philosophical questions more generally.

Davidson was frequently ill whilst at Oxford and graduated with a third class honours degree (something he regretted to the end of his life). It is indeed astonishing how quickly his career progressed in subsequent years, given the physical and emotional strain it must have placed on his health. Davidson travelled extensively after leaving university, visiting Italy and Switzerland, as well

as starting his training for holy orders under the supervision of Dr Charles Vaughan at the Temple Church off Fleet Street (Vaughan had many years previously been Headmaster at Harrow).¹² Vaughan was sceptical of the value of theological colleges, and the training he gave to those planning a career in the Church typically involved a mixture of reading and sermon preparation, as well as a secondment to one of the less salubrious neighbourhoods of the capital.¹³ Such a practical approach suited Davidson well, and many years later, when Bishop of Winchester, he spent considerable time organising the training of 'men who do not fit happily or easily into the life of an ordinary Theological College'.¹⁴ The future Archbishop had little real interest in theology as an academic discipline (he never hid his lack of a theological cast of mind). He was familiar with the intellectual debates that preoccupied some of his Anglican contemporaries, but showed little interest in them, a pattern that was later repeated at Canterbury when he had to resolve passionate disputes on which he looked with a certain bemusement.

When Davidson was still at Oxford, he met the son of Archbishop Tait of Canterbury, Craufurd Tait, who was subsequently instrumental in arranging for his friend to serve as a curate in Dartford following ordination in March 1874. Davidson had whilst preparing for ordination also had the opportunity to travel once again, heading to Egypt and Palestine, a trip that fostered his lifelong interest in the Christian East.¹⁵ Davidson's time in Dartford was, at least when he looked back many years later, among the happiest periods of his life. He worked with the sick, visiting smallpox patients, and offering care to those whose family were too scared to look after their relatives. At the age of 29, Davidson was well placed to embark on a successful career in the Church of England, set fair to obtain a living that would allow him to combine pastoral work with his love of country sports. Such a life might well have suited a man whose health was never good, but there was always in Davidson a streak of ambition which sat awkwardly with his modesty and caution. At the end of 1876, when Craufurd Tait announced that he planned to step down as his father's Private Secretary and Chaplain, the Archbishop asked his son to sound out Randall Davidson as a possible replacement (Archbishop Tait had known Davidson's father Henry since the two men were children in Edinburgh). The offer of the post was in due course made, and Davidson accepted without hesitation (before the formal offer was made, he tellingly fretted in a letter to his mother about his anxiety that he would be 'left out in the cold with nothing to look forward to').¹⁶ His move to Lambeth Palace set him on a course that was to lead a quarter of a century later to Canterbury.

Chaplain to Archbishop Tait

Davidson first heard Tait preach when he was still at Oxford, writing to his mother rather dismissively of the Archbishop's 'slightly pedantic, rather dry and strikingly unattractive discourse'. His six years as Resident Chaplain at Lambeth Palace transformed his view of Tait ('a personality to be neither forgotten nor

ignored').¹⁷ There was a series of almost uncanny similarities in the two men's background, which may have accounted for the good relationship they built up, which was cemented still further when Davidson married Tait's daughter Edith in 1878. Both men had been born and raised in Edinburgh families with a strong Presbyterian tradition. They also both suffered from lifelong poor health and chronic pain. There was also a more elusive symmetry in their attitude towards religion in general and the Church of England in particular (doubtless in part reflecting Tait's influence on his young Chaplain). Neither man was a natural mystic or a gifted theologian. Both were deeply interested in political questions, devouring newspapers and journals, and cultivating relations with leading politicians. When Davidson finally went to Canterbury, in 1903, he followed Tait in identifying one of his principal tasks as the preservation of the influence of the National Church. The two men were both passionately committed to maintaining the Church of England's status as the Established Church, not so much as a defence of privilege, but rather because they viewed it as a fundamental element in the fabric of the nation. Gladstone once told the House of Commons that 'Take the Church of England out of the history of England, and the history of England becomes a chaos, without order, without life, and without meaning'.¹⁸ Tait for his part agreed that the Church of England had always been

a part of the history of this country [. . .] a part so vital, entering so profoundly into the entire life and action of the country, that the severing of the two would leave nothing behind but a bleeding and lacerated mass.¹⁹

It was a sentiment echoed by Davidson many times, albeit in more muted terms, during his long journey to Canterbury.

Much of the work carried out by Davidson at Lambeth Palace was very dull. Tait recalled a few years before his death how he had often

seen [. . .] letters enough arrive [at Lambeth Palace] by a single post to fill a large basket. They have as soon as possible to be read and arranged [. . .] Many are of course routine letters, but each requires, none the less, an acknowledgement or reply [. . .] All these, and a hundred such cases, has the Chaplain to deal with.²⁰

The Chaplain also had to arrange interviews, fend off callers, and generally manage the Archbishop's working life. Davidson excelled at the work. He later wrote in his two-volume biography of Tait that the Archbishop always put 'complete and unreserved confidence in his secretaries'. Such confidence brought both problems and benefits. Tait was inclined to be

reckless about the time [and] engagements of his subordinates, and would keep us waiting in the most provoking manner on the chance of a spare three minutes for some signatures or directions, rather than hurry his movements in the least degree or cut a conversation short.²¹

The Archbishop's *modus operandi* nevertheless gave Davidson a chance to immerse himself in Church business, developing a detailed understanding of the concerns that had preoccupied its leading figures during recent years, including the protests against Ritualism that erupted in the period leading up to the passing of the controversial 1874 Public Worship Regulation Act (which led to the imprisonment of a number of Anglo-Catholic priests).²²

Davidson wrote to his father soon after becoming Chaplain that his post meant he was 'now bound to see and do everything', describing how he drafted Tait's letters, and met with leading figures from Church and State on behalf of the Archbishop.²³ His letters home also show Davidson's acute ability to sum up the people he met in the course of his work. Tait valued the efficiency of his 'Chaplain-Secretary', assuring Henry Davidson that if his son's health remained good he had 'before him every prospect of great usefulness and eminence in the high profession to the work of which he gives himself with so much zeal and wisdom'.²⁴ Although his duties at Lambeth Palace were mostly carried out behind the scenes, Davidson became an increasingly familiar figure to senior figures in the Church of England, not least through the administrative role he played during the second Lambeth Conference of 1878. Whilst it was by no means certain that the position of Archbishop's Chaplain was destined to lead to greater things, the work was congenial enough to encourage Davidson to decline offers of other appealing posts, including the living at Maidstone. His decision was partly motivated by a desire not to take his wife Edith away from her father, particularly as Craufurd had died some years earlier, but it also reflected his reluctance to leave a position that was more varied and interesting than anything to be found in a country parsonage or suburban rectory.

Tait was determined to use his time in office to project the influence of the Archbishop of Canterbury beyond the purely ecclesiastical sphere. The legal scholar and politician James Bryce later wrote rather archly that Tait's lack of 'original power as a thinker' did not stop him becoming 'almost a model to his own and the next generation of what an Archbishop of Canterbury ought to be'.²⁵ The Archbishop's determination to assert his influence meant that he spent a good deal of time cultivating relations with leading politicians and members of the Royal Family. He also spoke regularly in the House of Lords, even though he lacked what Davidson referred to as 'lofty eloquence' and 'incisive repartee'.²⁶ Tait also made sure that he appeared regularly at major public occasions in order to emphasise the role of the Church of England in public life. The Archbishop was a fervent defender of the principle of Establishment – 'this distinctive connexion between the civil Government of the country and its ecclesiastical polity'²⁷ – which he conceptualised less as a matter of subordination of Church to State and more as a kind of organic embrace (the notion that Tait was an unabashed Erastian does not entirely stand up to close scrutiny).

Despite his role in promoting the Public Worship Regulation Bill, which he himself introduced in the House of Lords, Tait could be flexible on important ecclesiastical issues. When the Gladstone Government had previously introduced legislation disestablishing the Anglican Church in Ireland, in 1869, the

Archbishop focused his energy less on opposing the measure and more on working hard to ensure that it took place on the best possible terms.²⁸ Tait recognised that defending the interests of the Church of England could on occasion require accommodation with developments that might not be in its immediate interest, but which had too strong a political momentum to oppose. It was a philosophy of compromise that Davidson was later to follow during his own archiepiscopate. He came to understand, like his father-in-law, that maintaining the influence of the National Church required active engagement with the forces of social and political change.

A courtier-priest? Davidson as Dean of Windsor

In the months before Tait died, in December 1882, he told his son-in-law that he hoped to be succeeded either by Bishop Browne of Winchester or the more youthful Bishop Benson of Truro. The Archbishop was, however, anxious not to be seen to be influencing the choice of his successor. In the days following Tait's death, Davidson wrote to the Marchioness of Ely, one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting, setting down the late Archbishop's views. It is not clear why Davidson chose to adopt such a course of action, given that Tait had been reluctant to make his views known, although he told Lady Ely that he was unwilling to take the responsibility of remaining silent (he concluded his letter by noting that 'now I have unburdened my soul').²⁹ The letter was duly passed on to the Queen, who summoned Davidson to visit her a few days later, when he repeated Tait's views about his possible successors. His knowledge of Church affairs impressed Victoria, who had already heard of his talents (the Dean of Windsor had just a few weeks earlier described him as 'most highly esteemed' when recommending him for the post of sub-almoner).³⁰ Her Journal entry shows that she was much 'struck' by the personality of her visitor, and believed that he could 'be of great use to me',³¹ whilst in a meeting with Gladstone two days later she told the Prime Minister that Davidson was 'an admirable and charming person, thoroughly acquainted with everything concerning the Church and the Clergy'.³²

Gladstone and the monarch did not agree about the appointment of Tait's successor as Archbishop. The Prime Minister favoured Edward Benson of Truro, who shared his own High Church views, whilst the Queen favoured Harold Browne. At Victoria's request, Davidson made a trip to Hampshire to inquire delicately whether Mrs Browne thought her elderly husband's health could stand up to the rigours of Canterbury. Gladstone nevertheless insisted on the appointment of Benson. Davidson was then instructed to go to Truro to discuss the offer of the post with the Bishop. He was also asked by the Queen to provide advice about the appointment of a new Bishop of Truro, to replace Benson, as well as the choice of a new Dean of Windsor to replace Gerald Wellesley. In the course of an astonishing few weeks, Davidson had won the trust of the monarch as an adviser on matters of major ecclesiastical appointments. Although one of his early biographers exaggerates Davidson's influence