Noble Powell and the
Episcopal Establishment in the Twentieth Century

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To my parents, Charles and Ruth Hein,
and to my brother, Stephen D. Hein

Series Editor's Preface

PETER W. WILLIAMS

Studies in Anglican History is a series of scholarly monographs sponsored by the Historical Society of the Episcopal Church and published by the University of Illinois Press. It is intended to bring the best of contemporary international scholarship on the history of the entire Anglican Communion, including the Church of England and the Episcopal church in the United States, to a broader readership.

In this volume David Hein, who teaches at Hood College in Maryland, tells the story of Noble Powell, the Episcopal bishop of Maryland during the middle years of the twentieth century. Powell's life, though in many ways an ecclesiastical success story, has dimensions bordering on the tragic as well. For many years he represented the "establishment" at its best; through his personal connections, which were in large part those that accrued to his episcopal incumbency, he counted as his friends many of the most influential civil and political figures of his city and state, and he could quietly bring about many good things through discreet personal interventions. Here was the very model of a benign, moderately progressive churchman who was very much in tune with his culture. When that culture came under more radical challenge from the civil rights movement, however, Powell found himself bordering on irrelevance, since the new advocates of justice were not respecters of the old ways of moderate adjustments within the system—a system that ultimately conspired in the maintenance of the color line. Powell's life is thus instructively exemplary of an era of ecclesiastical gentility that, perhaps sadly, had to yield to more compelling forces of the inexorable zeitgeist that had to prevail if the Christian community's ultimate goals were to be realized. Hein's work is thus a valuable addition both to our understanding of the history of the Episcopal church and, more broadly, to the stories of the roles that organized religion played in major social change, as well as to the dynamics that led to the undermining of the Protestant "mainline" as a compelling force in American social and religious life.

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Looking back in gratitude is the lightest and happiest of the duties remaining to an author after he has finished a manuscript. The present study would not be nearly as complete as it is without the generous assistance furnished by members of the Powell family in Maryland and Alabama and by scores of individuals—University of Virginia alumni, Episcopal clergy and laypersons, and representatives of other denominations—who submitted to my questions or wrote to me with their recollections of Noble Powell or of his successor, Harry Lee Doll. Among the friends and associates of Bishop Powell, Dorothy McIlvain Scott, sometime president of the Woman's Auxiliary in the diocese of Maryland, was an especially gracious and enthusiastic supporter of this work.

I am also grateful to Hood College for research grants awarded by its board of associates and for assistance provided by the staff of the Beneficial-Hodson Library. In addition, I appreciate not only the summer stipend awarded by the Louisville Institute but also the delightful opportunity for the collegial exchange of ideas and insights which that institution hosted one snowy weekend in the winter of 1998.

Among those who have supported me in this enterprise, the following deserve special thanks for their advice and encouragement: Jim Boston, Madeline Duntley, Marie Finn, David Baily Harned, David L. Holmes, F. Garner Ranney, Tom Samet, Mark Sandona, Gardiner H. Shattuck Jr., Charlie and Lee Tidball, and Amy Day Zielinski. In addition, the series editor, Peter W. Williams, and the anonymous readers for the University of Illinois Press offered many useful suggestions for revision. But even the good counsel of these friends and colleagues could not eliminate all faults, the responsibility for which is of course mine alone.

The greatest help as well as the greatest hindrance arose, however, as the result of my own personal history. In relation to the Episcopal church, I am in some ways an insider, with all the occasions for insight and partiality which that vantage affords. As a boy I not only experienced the benefits and bur-

dens peculiar to being a child of the rectory but also was raised by parents who knew Noble Powell quite well from the 1940s until his death in 1968. Thus I grew up hearing stories about him, accounts that often bordered on the hagiographic. Now, as a biographer, I realize that I have reaped biases as well as blessings that were planted in my past.

But I have an outsider's perspective, too, which I hope has also given me something of value. I am neither in orders nor in any lay office of distinction, and I have nothing to do with local or national church hierarchies. An ambivalent Episcopalian, I have had little trouble keeping in mind potential readers whose first choice for a biographical subject might not be a noncontroversial, orthodox, dead-white-male Episcopal bishop. In any event, I have set out here to sketch a portrait that I hope Episcopalians as well as those outside the Anglican Communion, both nonacademics and scholars, will find of interest.

Noble Powell and the
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Introduction

Fifteen years ago, when I knew comparatively little about the history of the Episcopal church, I supposed, rightly or wrongly, that the figure most likely to be identified as a leading churchman of the fifties and early sixties was the dean and bishop James Albert Pike (1913–69). At the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and later in California, Pike attracted considerable attention, not only through the media of sermons, books, and television but also through his increasingly radical theological pronouncements. His own physical and spiritual wanderings came to stand for those of many other Americans in the 1960s.[1] After Pike's death in the Judean desert, a writer for *America* noted that the former Episcopal bishop's "dying was . . . like his living: he was very much in the news but his precise whereabouts was unknown."[2]

Assuming that Pike was among the most familiar churchmen of his day, is he representative—let alone representative of the best—of the Episcopal church in the postwar decades? In 1986, when I mentioned to the eminent historian Anne Firor Scott my irritation at the way historical writing seemed to be slightly skewed in favor of those who were prone to self-promotion and away from more modest but nonetheless influential men and women, she responded that of course that was true and assured me that, indeed, "history is a crapshoot."

I had Pike and Powell in mind when I asked Professor Scott about this business of history. In fact, I do not take Powell to have been a more significant historical actor than Pike and therefore more worthy of consideration, but I do think that Powell is more representative of his era, including some of its finest characteristics, and a remarkable person in his own right.

The biographical treatment of a figure such as Noble Powell affords us the opportunity to look at the history of the Episcopal church at closer range than a chronicle of the entire denomination allows, while requiring us to keep the larger social and ecclesiastical context continually in view. And it makes possible a broader examination of the church's past than the history of an individual parish or diocese would permit. It has, in addition, the intrinsic

appeal of following the life and career of one man, in this case an individual of unusual charisma who thrived during a period that has been somewhat neglected by historians of the Episcopal church.

One reason for Powell's appeal as bishop was that he enjoyed a certain cachet that derived from his origins in another time and place. His pince-nez, perched on the aristocratic nose of this scion of southern planters, betokened not merely distinction but a patrician assurance born of a bygone era. Before the 1960s it did mainline religion no good to be seen as "new and improved." A bishop was supposed to provide continuity with the past, not the latest fashions in management or even theology. Thus, to Episcopalians who knew him, Powell seemed wise, well grounded, and, later, venerable—but not anachronistic; people thought him, in Hemingway's phrase, the "true gen."

His father was an impoverished planter, and Noble was raised a Baptist rather than an Episcopalian, but otherwise his background fit the conception of his personal history held by most who knew him. The first Powells came to Alabama in 1818, one year before the territory became a state, and established themselves as prosperous cotton planters and county leaders. Around the nadir of the Deep South's fortunes, in 1911, young Noble left home, first for Auburn and later for the University of Virginia and a career in the Episcopal church. Before he left he absorbed essential elements of his native culture, including not only features of the South's intertwined religious faiths—evangelical Christianity and southern civic piety—but also some of his region's deepest values and habits of the heart.

The theologian Julian N. Hartt, who was always aware of the effect that growing up on the American prairie had on his own development, observed that we not only "have histories"; "we are creatures defined by historicality."[3] Chapter one of this book discusses the formative influences in Noble Powell's life, delineating the factors that appear to have shaped his later thinking and acting. This chapter suggests a trajectory that runs throughout the rest of his life.

One way of thinking about the source of this trajectory—and of Powell's attraction—is to see his existence as grounded in what he took to be timeless principles. Powell was not only "the last bishop of the old church," as some have styled him, and therefore emblematic of an entire era of Episcopal church history; he was also consciously committed to what his contemporary William Faulkner extolled as "the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths . . . love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice."[4]

We can also perceive upon closer inspection that Powell's life was particularly rooted in a belief in the perduring value of the cardinal virtues of the Victorian South. In the postbellum evangelical culture in which he was raised, Powell came to appreciate the importance of diligence and self-mastery, of control over the natural impulses. Believing in a cosmos governed by eternal laws and superintended by a benevolent deity, he accepted his culture's stress on the humanizing advantages of education, refinement, religion, and family love. As a child of the local aristocracy, he learned how a gentleman should use his stature and personality to help civilize others, bringing order and hope to lives in disarray.[5]

We gain a sharper awareness of this mentality if we compare it with the outlook of those who rose to challenge it at the very time that young Noble was leaving his home in the Black Belt and striking out on his own. Modernist playwrights, novelists, musicians, architects, and painters, who were developing their ideas in the years before and after World War I, held views that were almost diametrically opposed to the mindset that Noble Powell embodied.

For the modernists, the opacity of the universe was a condition to be accepted, even welcomed; moral or epistemological certainty was impossible. The world was more strange and chaotic than rational and stable; the human psyche contained dark subterranean forces whose savage, uncivilized nature should be recognized and explored. Rebelling against what they viewed as the Victorians' unnatural repression of vitality, the modernists repudiated fusty ideals of bourgeois harmony in favor of a tentative integration that admitted unpredictability and contrarieties. Seeking liberation from Victorian culture's imposed innocence, modernists embraced criticism and conflict. Fresh artistic forms—free verse, atonal music, abstract painting, and stream-of-consciousness writing—expressed the artists' rejection of outmoded structures and their desire to affirm subjectivity. After the First World War, this same intellectual and artistic sensibility incorporated a powerful current of disillusionment and melancholy, symbolic of ruined civilizations and shattered perspectives.[6]

The modern artist and the traditional cleric had dissimilar ambitions growing out of different vocations. A half-century would pass before anything resembling the modernist temper would enter the Episcopal church in force. Not until the 1960s, when the denomination was compelled to respond to a variety of challenges from within and outside its walls, would the church be dramatically unsettled by the major dislocations of the twentieth century. Bishop James Pike would have his day, as would other, more

thoughtful and less mercurial instigators of change. At this time the church would confront not only a mess of problems but also a host of opportunities, joining in the effort to break down old barriers.[7] In retrospect we can interpret Noble Powell as standing for the church as it existed before its epochal displacement. His years as bishop occurred during what one might call an Indian summer for the Episcopal church—and the rest of the Protestant establishment—in America.

The idea of the priest instantiating the old truths and virtues in his own person is present in the image of the minister as parson, a theme that is introduced explicitly in chapter two. Teaching more by example than precept, the parson conveyed truth as much through his personality and character as through liturgy and preaching.[8] This approach to ministry is part of a characteristically Anglican understanding of the duties of a priest, one that emphasizes personal engagement, pastoral care, and prayer: the ordained person as a distinctive kind of mediator and exemplar.

Self-possessed, approachable, and respected, Powell prospered as chaplain to the University of Virginia in a setting that partook of an older romanticism and a place that remained committed to proper form, convention, and order. As parson, Powell guided students within a subculture still mildly redolent of Victorian innocence.[9]

In this second chapter, we see Powell functioning in a position of influence at a time when the Episcopal church and other old-line denominations began to commit their resources to college work and to the domestic missionary enterprise. Powell's efforts in Charlottesville won him national recognition in the Episcopal church, and he served in the archdeaconry of the Blue Ridge under a man who had already achieved a notable record in the mission field: Frederick W. Neve, the tireless champion of the mountain people. This chapter provides a window onto a significant phase of the church's history as well as glimpses of a lost world.

Somewhat isolated in Charlottesville, Powell moved to the heart of the Episcopal establishment in the 1930s when he became rector of one of the most prominent parishes on the East Coast and then dean of the Washington National Cathedral and warden of the College of Preachers. Surrounded if not overborne by the grand institutions of the church, Powell in this chapter lies partially hidden from our gaze. But even at the National Cathedral—America's Westminster Abbey—and at the College of Preachers Powell made his humane presence felt, converting administration into a project that served the ends of ecumenism and evangelism. By the time he left Washington he was one of the best-known leaders in the Episcopal church, admired by cler-

gy and laypeople throughout the United States and by many in the Church of England as well.

Chapters four and five develop the theme of the coalescence of episcopal authority and community validation. In a manner analogous to the way in which ancient heroic societies—unlike ours—maintained a moral and social framework conducive to the flourishing of heroes, postwar American society enabled mainline Protestant leaders to succeed, albeit, one could argue, largely on its own terms.[10]

Episcopal bishops such as Noble Powell not only launched the first building campaigns in many years, established new diocesan programs and institutions, and oversaw the revitalization of liturgy and Christian education; they also reached beyond their denomination's boundaries to foster ties with other civil and religious leaders and to play prominent roles in their communities. The dominant culture embraced the mainline churches, and Powell thrived in the pastoral office of bishop. His authority, grounded in all three of the ways—legal, traditional, and charismatic—in which leaders gain and exercise legitimate authority, was widely acknowledged. At the end of his career, however, we see Powell being challenged by new methods in the struggle for civil rights.

Noble Powell is a representative figure, then, but finally uninteresting if only a type. A supporting social environment and an ecclesiastical era that placed more emphasis than later generations on the authority of one man are not enough to make a bishop a compelling figure. The key in Powell's case is an amalgam of character traits—spiritual depth, self-discipline, a sense of humor, confidence, and effortless magnetism, among others—that worked together in the service of a practical theology of Christian friendship. The result was an authentic brand of spiritual availability (*disponibilité*), a goodly supply of pastoral wisdom generously applied, and a gentle strength that drew people in and affirmed their best selves.

The book ends with an attempt to provide something in the nature of a dénouement, depicting Powell's own decline and the declension, for good or ill, of the church he stood for. After a consideration of Powell's legacy which focuses on themes that suffused his episcopate comes an effort to place Powell within H. Richard Niebuhr's familiar typology of "Christ and culture." The chapter then sketches how fresh demands and a posttraditional society emerged, bringing about a shift in our views of leadership and cultural legitimation. Referring to the role of exemplary figures within Anglicanism, the book's conclusion offers an assessment of Powell's career and a comment on the nature of his influence.