

Soon after taking up the pastorate at New Park Street Baptist Church in Southwark in 1854, Charles Spurgeon came across a young street preacher by the name of Thomas Medhurst. Medhurst clearly had preaching gifts, but he also had very little education and a very shaky grasp of English grammar. Spurgeon took him under his wing and started to teach him. Out of this grew the famous Pastors' College, started by Spurgeon in 1857 with Medhurst and one other student, and established to train men for pastoral ministry. The college continues today, though with rather different theological convictions, as Spurgeon's College.

Spurgeon's Pastors' College stood in a long tradition of colleges and academies established and run outside the University system for the benefit of dissenters who would not conform to the liturgy and standards of the Church of England. Several dissenting academies, as they are known, achieved considerable standing: Bristol Baptist College, still in existence, began in this way in 1720; New College, Manchester, founded in 1786, went through various incarnations before becoming Harris Manchester College, Oxford, as it now is; Philip Doddridge ran a well-known dissenting academy in Northampton between 1730 and his death in 1751.

Less well-known are the academies of the late seventeenth century which preceded these more famous institutions but were in effect the originators and pioneers of this way of providing higher education and training ministers. I want in this paper to explore these early academies and, by means of examples, give you some feel for their character and influence, before drawing some conclusions.

The story begins in 1660 with the restoration of the monarchy and the return to Britain of Charles, son of the executed Charles I, as King Charles II. His return was the signal for many clergymen, who had themselves been ousted from their livings during the commonwealth period, to reassert their claim to their former positions, resulting in numbers of men being compelled to leave their ministries. This exodus from the established church was reinforced in 1662, when Parliament passed the Act of Uniformity - in full, 'An Act for the Uniformity of Publique Prayers and Administracion of Sacraments & other Rites & Ceremonies and for establishing the Form of making ordaining and consecrating Bishops Priests and Deacons in the Church of England'. The Act established the Book of Common Prayer as the only

legitimate liturgy in the Church of England and required all ministers to declare publicly, by or before the Feast of St Bartholomew 1662, their complete assent to ‘every thing contained and prescribed in and by’ that book and their agreement to the ‘use of all things in the said Booke contained and prescribed’ (Art. II). The Book of Common Prayer was not new, nor was it new that it should be used as the liturgical manual in the established church. However, it had always, until this point, been accepted that some ministers held conscientious objections to certain elements in the book - for example, the making of the cross as a sign at baptism, or kneeling at communion. They had been able to continue to operate legitimately, without complying strictly on the points on which they held scruples. Such men were sometimes known as nonconformists - that is, ministers who continued within the Church of England but without conforming to every element of its official liturgy. Now, however, under the Act of Uniformity, such men would be forced either to conform, against their conscience, or to leave the ministry of the established church. Around two thousand men chose to follow their consciences and were ejected from the only church they had ever served, often with the loss of practically all they had.

As well as being deprived of their congregations, church buildings, homes and livelihoods, these men and those who followed them were effectively barred from the two English universities, Oxford and Cambridge. The University of Oxford required students to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Article and to take the Oath of Supremacy when they were admitted to the university at the start of their studies. Cambridge imposed no such requirement on admission, but, like Oxford, required students on graduation to subscribe to the three articles of the 36th canon, which affirmed that (1) the king is the supreme governor of the realm, including in ecclesiastical matters, (2) the Book of Common Prayer contains nothing contrary to the word of God, and will be used to the exclusion of all other, and (3) the Thirty-nine Articles are agreeable to the word of God. Thus dissenters, as they became known, could not enter Oxford to study; they could study at Cambridge but not graduate. In practice, dissenters were no longer able to obtain a university education.

Oxford and Cambridge were, of course, at the time the only institutions of higher education in England and Wales. They were also in effect the ministerial training academies for those who desired to be ordained into the pastorate. Thus, at a stroke, the ejected ministers and their congregations were deprived both of a place to send their children for higher education and of

an institution at which to train their future ministers. The consequences for their economic future, as well as their spiritual future, were clearly very serious indeed.

Two options seemed to be available for dissenters who sought higher education for their children or preparation for pastoral ministry. The first option would be to look to institutions in Scotland or overseas to fill the gap. Increasingly, this was a route followed by those who were able to do so. The Universities of Glasgow and Aberdeen were particularly favoured by dissenters, as were Dutch universities, especially that at Leiden. However, for many dissenters, particularly in the early years following 1662, international travel was not an option. For these, a different solution was established – a period of study with a private tutor.

This course was also risky. The Act of Uniformity, which resulted in the ejection of so many ministers from their livings, covered teachers as well as ministers, requiring ‘every School master keeping any publique or private Schoole & every person instructing or teaching any Youth in any House or private Family as a Tutor or School master’ to declare it to be unlawful to take up arms against the king, that they will conform to the liturgy of the Church of England and (until 1682) to disclaim any obligation under the Solemn League and Covenant (Art. VI); moreover, any such teacher required a licence from the Archbishop in order to operate legitimately. Nonconformists were generally unwilling to apply for a licence, for obvious reasons. Furthermore, tutors who had studied at Oxford or Cambridge, as many of the early ones had, could also be pursued under what was known as the ‘Stamford oath’, by which Masters graduates at either university undertook not to teach outside the two universities. Dissenting tutors therefore operated, technically, outside the law and, as we shall see, on more than a few occasions met with harassment from the authorities as a result.

Until recently, information on the Dissenting Academies, particularly the earliest ones, was difficult to access. The principal reference work was H. McLachlan’s *English Education under the Test Acts*, published in 1931. This described the various academies one by one, giving details of dates, tutors, curricula, books studied and some of the students who studied at them. It remains a useful work, but over the years has been shown to be incomplete and sometimes inaccurate. In recent years, historians have begun to subject the academies to a more detailed study, in particular looking more closely at the manuscript records of the academies which still exist, for example at the Dr Williams’s Library in London. One of the fruits of this research is a wonderful online database, which is freely accessible, called

*Dissenting Academies Online*. This contains detailed information on academies, tutors and students, with references to archival sources. It also provides short articles on the academies and the historical background to them. It is a fascinating and invaluable tool and I have used it extensively in the preparation of this paper, alongside the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, also available online through local libraries. Those behind this research are also working on a book to be published shortly by Cambridge University Press, edited by Isabel Rivers and David Wykes and provisionally entitled *A History of the Dissenting Academies in the British Isles, 1660-1860*, which will undoubtedly become the standard work on the subject.

The earliest academies listed in *Dissenting Academies Online* began operating in about the year 1666, four years after the Act of Uniformity and, of course, the year of the Great Fire of London: the two academies were Charles Morton's academy in Newington Green, which became well known, and a much smaller academy located in Connor in Antrim in Ireland about which very little is known except that the famous dissenting minister John Howe appears to have taught there. Between 1666 and the Toleration Act of 1689, a twenty-three year period, twenty-four academies in total are listed on the database as having been in operation at some point, with a total of forty-three named students. Clearly, the actual number of students would have been substantially more than this.

What were these academies like? Some of them were very small, with one man teaching a few students from his own home, using whatever resources he happened to own himself. One John Malden, about whom very little is known, taught at Whitchurch in Shropshire around the year 1668. Henry Hickman (d. 1692) ran a small academy for a few years based near Bromsgrove in Worcestershire, with six known students. Hickman had been rector of St Aldates in Oxford during the Commonwealth period, but lost that living in 1660 at the restoration. John Shuttlewood (1632 - 1689) had been educated at Trinity College, Cambridge and was ordained in 1654 to be minister in Ravenstone, Derbyshire. He was ejected in 1660 and moved to the area of Hinckley, where he conducted an active preaching ministry which attracted the attention of informers and of the authorities. On one occasion, a meeting that he was leading was surprised by a band of thirty to forty armed horsemen and Shuttlewood was arrested and imprisoned. Despite his troubles, he established a small academy at Sulby, near Market Harborough, which ran for just a few years, from about 1678 to about 1682. There are only about five known students, all of whom became ministers.

They included the well-known nonconformist minister Joshua Oldfield (1656-1729), who himself became tutor of an influential academy in London.

Ralph Button had had a fairly illustrious career at Oxford University prior to the restoration, becoming public orator of the university in 1648 and a canon of Christ Church in the same year. He was compelled to resign both these posts and leave Oxford in July 1660. He moved to Brentford in Middlesex, where he was imprisoned for offering private tuition.

Subsequently, he began a small academy in Islington, where he continued until his death in 1680. Only a handful of his students are known, but they appear to have included Joseph Jekyll, who later held the senior legal appointment of Master of the Rolls, as well as the future dissenting minister Samuel Pomfret.

So we see that several of the known academies were very small, ran for only a short time, suffered serious difficulties in terms of lack of resources and official harassment, but managed to turn out men who became significant later in life both within Dissent, as ministers and tutors, and beyond it, in public life more generally. The men who ran them were, on the whole, former students at one of the universities, often holding positions of some eminence at Oxford or Cambridge, but who had been forced to leave at the time of the restoration.

Not all these early academies were small, however. John Woodhouse had studied at Trinity College, Cambridge, though he did not matriculate. He was on course for ordination when the Act of Uniformity came into effect, as a result of which he was compelled to leave the Church of England. He served as a private chaplain to Lady Grantham and preached at conventicles - illegal meetings of dissenters for worship. He obtained a licence from Archbishop of Canterbury, Gilbert Sheldon, to teach grammar in the dioceses of Lincoln, Lichfield and Hereford. Nevertheless, after setting up his academy in Sheriffhales in Shropshire, he found himself in trouble with the authorities on more than one occasion, serving at least two terms of imprisonment. *Dissenting Academies Online* has records of fifty-nine students of Woodhouse's - no doubt there were more whose names we do not know. They included nonconformist ministers Benjamin Bennett, Matthew Clarke, Thomas Davies, John Newman and Benjamin Robinson, as well as some who became eminent in other fields, for example the prominent politicians Thomas Foley, who became First Baron Foley and Fellow of the Royal Society, and Henry St John, later Viscount Bolingbroke.

What did Woodhouse teach at his academy? Joshua Toulmin (1740-1815), an eighteenth-century historian who had himself studied at a Dissenting Academy and who gained access to the papers of a number of earlier academies, wrote about Woodhouse's institution:

The students in the seminary at Sheriffhales were conducted through a course of lectures on logic, anatomy, and mathematics; beginning usually with the first, and sometimes with one or the other of these branches of knowledge. These were followed by lectures in physics, ethics, and rhetoric. They were heard successively in Greek and Hebrew, at other times of the day or week.... they who were intended for the pulpit were conducted through a course of theological reading.

Toulmin then gives a list of the books which students were required to read. The list is impressive in its length and scope, representing many of the major works then available in the fields of natural theology and apologetics, logic, mathematics, science, ethics, philosophy and theology.<sup>1</sup> Despite the difficulties under which the academy laboured, the students of John Woodhouse could not complain that they had been deprived of the opportunity of a deep and broad education.

Another well-known academy of these early days was that run by Charles Morton in Newington Green, just to the south of Stoke Newington in what is now north London. Morton had graduated from Oxford and gone into the Church of England ministry, being appointed rector of a parish in Cornwall, from which he was ejected in 1660. He continued to preach in Cornwall, however, before moving to London in 1666, where he started teaching. There are records of twenty-three students at his academy at Newington Green, though again it seems that many more than that studied there. Morton has the reputation of being the first tutor to teach in English - the usual language of instruction at that time being Latin. One of his students was the journalist and author Daniel Defoe, who apparently claimed that Morton's pupils gained a greater mastery of English than at any other contemporary school. (Another of Morton's students was called Timothy Cruso, who seems to have been a few years older than Defoe but may have overlapped with him - I am aware however of no evidence that Cruso [no 'e' on the end] ever travelled overseas.) Another of Morton's students was Samuel Wesley, the father of John and Charles. Samuel later went to Exeter College, Oxford, turning against Dissent and conforming to the Church of England; he wrote

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Toulmin, *An Historical View of the State of the Protestant Dissenters in England, and of the Progress of Free Enquiry and Religious Liberty, from the Revolution to the Accession of Queen Anne*, Bath: Printed by Richard Cruttwell, 1814, Chapter III, Section I. 'Of Their Academies'.

an attack on the dissenting academies, criticising the approach adopted in dissenting education and the standards they attained. Despite Wesley's strictures, the curriculum at Morton's academy seems to have been fairly comprehensive. The entry on Morton in the *ODNB* states, 'Besides the usual religious and classical curriculum there was instruction in history, geography, mathematics, natural science, politics, and modern languages, and a laboratory equipped with air pumps, thermometers, and various mathematical instruments. There was a bowling green for recreation.' In 1685, Morton was forced to abandon his academy and leave the country, going to New England, because of harassment from the authorities.

One of the largest academies which operated during this difficult time for Dissent was that of Richard Frankland (1630-98). Frankland had studied at Christ's College, Cambridge. Subsequently, during the commonwealth period, he began to preach in Hexham (Northumberland) and the surrounding area. He was ordained by presbyters, rather than by a bishop of the established church, in 1653. He held various ministerial posts before being appointed to the living at Bishop Auckland. At the restoration, however, his right to that living was challenged and he was ejected because of his refusal to conform to the terms of the Act of Uniformity or to accept the episcopal ordination which was offered to him by Bishop Cosin. In 1670, he started an academy which he continued to his death in 1698. He appears to have been assisted by other tutors at various points, but he seems to have taken the main burden of the teaching himself. According to *ODNB*, subjects taught at Frankland's Academy included philosophy, theology, Bible background, the sciences, logic and history.

Frankland was constantly subject to the threat of prosecution. As a result, he moved about - his academy operated, at various times, in different places in Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cumbria, on either side of what is now the M6: Rathmell (north Yorks.), Natland (near Kendal), Calton Hall (7 miles from Skipton), Crosthwaite (near Kendal), Hartborough (near Cartmel, Lancs., which had the advantage of being on the county border between Lancs. and Cumberland, making it easier to escape a writ by moving to the other county) and Attercliffe (near Sheffield), before returning finally to Rathmell. Over the course of his career, he was excommunicated by Anglican courts at least twice, had a petition brought against his academy before the Archbishop of York and faced the threat of prosecution for his teaching. None of these stopped him, but the experience of continual harassment must have subjected him to considerable strain. Astonishingly, given his various difficulties, *Dissenting*

*Academies Online* has records of 309 students who received tuition from Frankland over the twenty-eight years in which he taught. They included future dissenting ministers such as James Clegg, Thomas Dickenson and William Tong, the future Anglican minister John Disney, and the dissenter Timothy Jollie, who himself was to run a dissenting academy at Attercliffe (where John Jennings, who taught Philip Doddridge, studied; other students of Jollie's included the nonconformist ministers Thomas Bradbury, John Conder, Jeremiah Gill, John Kenrick, David Some and Samuel Wright, as well as, for a short time, the future Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Secker).

The academies which operated between the Act of Uniformity and the Act of Toleration thus gave effective training to a substantial number of men who became the dissenting ministers and tutors of the next generation. Even the smallest, most short-lived academies appear to have trained men who later flourished as dissenting ministers. They managed to do this despite the constant threat of harassment and prosecution, threats that were sometimes realised. They did it without the benefit of the immense history of learning which existed at the universities, having to provide their own libraries and equipment as well as houses in which to teach. They were themselves highly educated men, most of whom had benefited from a university education. They believed strongly in the need for a learned, educated ministry and sought to ensure that the next generation of dissenters would be provided with ministers who were as well educated and trained as was possible in the circumstances. The number of their students who themselves took up academy teaching is perhaps a testimony to their success in passing on this aspiration.

The passing of the Toleration Act in 1689, which removed many of the legal restrictions on Dissenting worship, together with the accession, following the flight of James II, of the Protestants William and Mary to the throne, introduced a somewhat easier time for Dissenting academies. Although the Toleration Act did not actually lift the constraints on teaching imposed by the Act of Uniformity, and occasional attempts continued to be made to harass or prosecute dissenting tutors, in practice academies were generally able to operate more freely and more publicly. If there were twenty-four academies known to have been operating in the twenty-nine year period between the restoration of the monarchy and the Act of Toleration, in the twenty-four year period from 1690 to the death of Queen Anne in 1714, *Dissenting Academies Online* records a total of forty-six academies in operation at some point, of which thirty-eight were new during that period. The names of 235 students who

studied at academies during that period are recorded. Again, this is likely to be a significant understatement of the total number of students over that time. It would seem that greater liberty enabled dissenters more easily to provide training and instruction for the younger generation than had been the case during the years of persecution. It was during this period that the dissenting ministers of the first part of the eighteenth century were trained: Isaac Watts, the dissenting ministers and tutors David and John Jennings, Henry Grove, Timothy Jollie, Thomas Rowe, the dissenting historian Daniel Neal, as well as others who became prominent in public life, including Joseph Butler, later a bishop and author of, among other works, a famous work of apologetics, *Analogy of Religion*, and Thomas Secker, future Archbishop of Canterbury. These men were the fruit, ultimately, of the first dissenting academies established and run under such difficult circumstances by those ejected at the restoration of the monarchy.

Bringing these various threads together, the following points can be made about these early academies.

1. The high level of motivation of the early tutors, particularly those who operated subject to the threat of harassment and prosecution, is remarkable. What drove them, not only to give up their livings in the established church, but to risk fines or imprisonment by taking up activities which were, at best, on the fringes of the law? Having been ejected from the Church of England, why not retire to a quiet life of study? Part of the answer no doubt was financial: many of these men had families and no other means of earning a living. Tutoring provided some income, though probably not very much. But this seems unlikely to have been the whole answer. A few had independent means. All of them were men of conviction, sufficient to give up their livings and suffer ejection rather than harm their consciences by agreeing to a liturgy with which they had serious disagreement. That same conviction drove them to seek to pass on their learning to the next generation.

2. The risks which the early tutors were willing to run demonstrates the high value which they gave to ministerial training and an educated ministry. As principal of a theological seminary, I hear many reasons given for not pursuing a full-time course of study in preparation for ministry, particularly reasons to do with cost and time. Though the costs can be high and the time required significant, we at least do not have to contend with the risks of prosecution nor the difficulties attendant upon a frequent change of location in order to

escape the attention of the authorities. On the whole, one suspects that our facilities, accommodation and library provision far exceed those available to the students at these early academy. These men believed that an aspiring pastor needed more than a reading list and some relevant on-the-job experience, if he were to be adequately trained. They had a high view of the requirements necessary to qualify for ministerial work and they were prepared to expend the time, cost and effort required to gain the learning that they believed to be requisite.

3. The range of subjects covered at these centres of learning is also remarkable. Even if the quality of the teaching was uneven, it would seem that several tutors managed to teach the core subjects to a high level – philosophy, ethics and theology, in particular, together with some instruction in mathematics and the sciences. They took the study of Hebrew and Greek seriously and they generally taught in Latin. While the proposition that the teaching in dissenting academies exceeded in quality that available at the universities at the time has been questioned, it remains the case that the core subjects were studied thoroughly and that the tutors kept up with developments. Thus, for example, as the seventeenth century gave way to the eighteenth, the traditional Aristotelian approach to reasoning and logic was beginning to be displaced by the more contemporary approach of John Locke. In this area, at least, the dissenters seem to have led the way: Locke was not taken seriously at Oxford, at least, until rather later in the century.

4. The evidence suggests that the teaching at these early academies was orthodox and, for the most part, Reformed in its theology. The first tutors at these academies had been prepared to lose their livings in order to follow their consciences - consciences which were generally informed by a Calvinistic theology, which they no doubt sought to pass on to their students. As the seventeenth century gave way to the eighteenth, however, and as it became less risky to espouse and teach views which dissented from the views of established orthodoxy, signs of a departure from standard Reformed doctrine began to be evident in some areas. The eighteenth century saw a growing distrust of creeds and confessions on the part of many dissenters and a corresponding resort to the place of reason, unhindered by historical theology or formulations of doctrine. Calls were frequently made in the name of Christian unity to return to the simple language of scripture rather than to the man-made language of confessions. In some academies, the result of this was an increasing freedom to question historic orthodoxy and introduce new ideas into Christian doctrine. This particularly affected

the doctrine of the trinity as well as the distinctly Calvinistic features of soteriology: unconditional election, total depravity and original sin, limited atonement and the doctrine of justification by faith alone through the imputed righteousness of Christ. The effect was a move, in many quarters of Dissent, away from the Reformed theology espoused by the earlier dissenting tutors and away from the orthodox trinitarianism which had characterised them. Although the evidence does not support the contention that the eighteenth-century academies were solely responsible for these shifts in thinking within Dissent, the academies were certainly affected by those shifts and no doubt bear some responsibility for the changes that took place. Thus, although the early Dissenting academies set a precedent for later generations of Dissenters as to how they might educate their youth and train the rising cohort of ministers, they were not able to ensure that their theology was necessarily passed down from one generation to the next.

In conclusion, the early Dissenting academies are an example of the outworking of clear, strong Christian conviction. They represent a sustained attempt, against sometimes fierce opposition, to preserve an educated ministry outside the established church and to construct, almost from scratch, a system for sustaining such a ministry from one generation to the next. It is through their efforts that the pastors and tutors of the early eighteenth century were trained and it is largely due to them that, once true toleration was achieved, dissenting academies found themselves in a position gradually to establish themselves more securely and become effective teaching and training institutions in their own right.

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