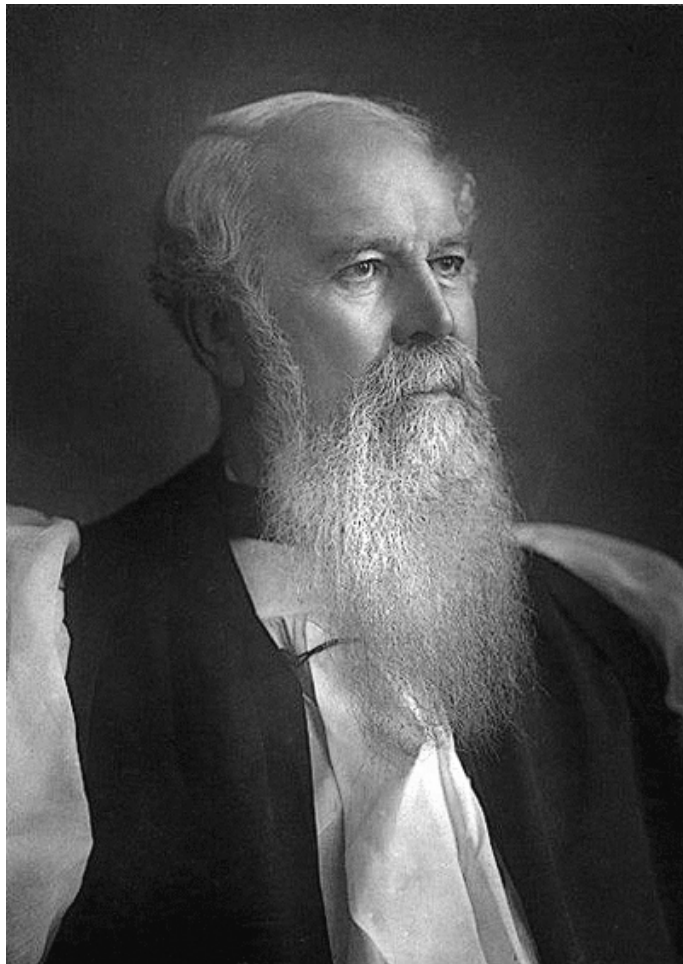


CHRISTIAN RESOURCES

GREAT PREACHERS

THE LIFE OF JOHN CHARLES RYLE (The Bishop of Liverpool) 1816 - 1900



Bishop Warwick Cole-Edwardes

Footprints into Africa

The Ryle family have long been rooted in the north east of Cheshire. Mr John Ryle, of Macclesfield, grandfather of the Bishop, whose life work we purpose briefly to sketch, was born in 1745; and it was during his boyhood, that the first Silk Mill was (in 1756) established in the little town. The trade rapidly spread; and he himself founded a business, which by an accumulation of profits through a long succession of years, placed him in possession of an ample fortune. His son and successor, Mr. John Ryle besides continuing the Silk Mill, carried on a Bank at Macclesfield, and in partnership with the same gentleman; another Bank at Manchester.

On May 10, 1816, John Charles Ryle, his eldest son, was born at Park House, in the outskirts of Macclesfield: in the time he was sent to Eton, and in or about 1833 to Christ Church, Oxford. In 1832 Macclesfield was enfranchised by the Reform Act, Mr John Ryle being returned at its senior member; and thus the father's Parliamentary career and the son's University life began together. The fond hope of both men was that the Ryle name should, for long years to come, be associated with their native town's new dignity, there being everything to encourage the expectation in the father's personal influence and the son's growing ability. In 1835 the father was elected; and in 1836 the son gained the Craven Scholarship, a much envied university distinction. In 1837, after the dissolution occasioned by the new reign, (the accession of Queen Victoria, the father did not offer himself to the electors: and this might seem to indicate that the commercial difficulties of the period, which were soon to culminate, had begun to make the anxious in his various undertaking.

The son's energies, however, relaxed not; and on February 22, 1838, he took his B.A. degree, with first class classical honours. Nothing had then occurred in his father's business to discourage the son's hopes of a Parliamentary career, and for this, which had so long been the object of his heart there was a manifest and increasing personal fitness. His intellectual had been proved in the schools; he was of manly physique; both at Eton and Oxford he had been at the head of the boats and the "eleven"; in his county he was now an active and popular yeomanry officer.

But God had higher work for him. In the early summer of 1841, among the gathering difficulties of the commercial world, Mr. Ryle's Banks both stopped; the Silk Mill, we rather think, having been previously relinquished. In deep waters, John Charles Ryle; now twenty five, had to reconsider his future. His mind became directed to the Christian ministry; and in the year of the family disasters, he was admitted to deacon's orders by the Bishop of Winchester (C.R. Sumner). His first curacy was at Exbury, a chapelry in the parish of Fawley, the rector of which was Mr Gibson in that seaside hamlet of the New Forest, far removed from his late great home in Cheshire. Mr Ryle buried his grief and recommenced life, but heir to a nobler inheritance than the secular one of which he had been disappointed. In the plainest of little chapels within a grove of trees he met his humble flock, tenants of the neighbouring square; and the way he went in and out of the cottage homes showed how completely his soul had bent itself to his new lot. During the two years of his declension there he acquired, it can be stated, an entire pastoral knowledge of every man, woman and child, under his charge.

(Ryle started his ministry as curate at the Chapel of Ease in Exbury, Hampshire, moving on to become rector of St Thomas's, Winchester in 1843 and then rector of Helmingham, Suffolk the following year. While at Helmingham he married and was widowed twice. He began publishing popular tracts, and Matthew, Mark and Luke of his series of [Expository Thoughts on the Gospels](#) were published in successive years (1856-1858). His final parish was Stradbroke, also in Suffolk, where he moved in 1861, and it was as vicar of All Saints that he became known nationally for his straightforward

preaching and firm defence of evangelical principles. He wrote several well-known and still-in-print books, often addressing issues of contemporary relevance for the Church from a biblical standpoint. He completed his Expository Thoughts on the Gospels while at Stradbroke, with his work on the Gospel of John (1869). His third marriage, to Henrietta Amelia Clowes in 1861, lasted until her death in 1889.)

Late in 1843 the good Bishop appointed him to a living in his gift, St. Thomas and St. Clement, in the city of Winchester; far before a twelve-months had passed, in or about August, 1844, Mr Ryle accepted from Lord Lyndhurst, who was then Lord Chancellor, the living of Helmingham, in Suffolk. Though he had all his life used to an urban people, he never again would accept a town ministry until his appointment to Salisbury and Liverpool.

On the 29th of October, 1845, he married Matilda Charlotte Louisa, the youngest daughter of John Pemberton Plumptre, M.P. of Fredville, in Kent. In 1861, on the nomination of Dr Pelham, subsequently Bishop of Norwich, he became Vicar of Stradbroke, a great rural parish in Suffolk, having a large population and a spacious church with a splendid tower. The church he restored, besides building schools. In 1869 he was made rural Dean; and in 1871, Honorary Canon of Norwich. In 1880 he was advanced to the Deanery of Salisbury; and before he had taken possession was nominated to the newly-founded see of Liverpool as its first bishop. But we must now go back again somewhat.

His Helmingham incumbency was the main period of the issue of Ryle's Tracts, "the first of these being his opening sermon, originally printed for private distribution only, and taking its title from the text, "I have somewhat to say unto thee". The series was, indeed, a remarkable one: not so much for the number of the tracts, although this exceeded 200 – since we can hardly be mistaken in assuming that they were written editions of his sermons as for their execution and success. They were addressed, not to the illiterate and profligate, but to the respectable, middle-class church-goers. Short, sharp, and importunate were the titles; and below the titles was matter solid, fresh, and as full of strict reasoning, on a Scriptural basis, as of spiritual appeal; in a style undeclamatory, unconventional, earnest, and pointed.

"Are you converted?" "Are you forgiven?" "Are you holy?" "Are you free?" "Do you pray?" "How Readest Thou?" "Strive!" "Watch!" "Occupy till I come!" "Wheat or Chaff". "Our Home". In this fashion his readers were challenged, and cautioned, and stimulated to self-searching and to soul-enquiry.

In 1876 was made out a list more than one hundred tracts, with the circulation of each appended; and the sum total exceeded eleven millions and a half; and since then has considerably increased. A selection of them has been made in eight small volumes, under the felicitous title of "Home Truths".

Compared with other successful tracts, Mr Ryle's had a strength especially with their own, an individuality never to be mistaken. They certainly owed much to their titles. We fully believe that the Bishop's intimates could tell of many a triumph won to the Redeemer's kingdom by these multi-rudinous messengers. Some of the results are known to the public. Bishop Riley, of the "Mexican Reformed Church", which began in 1865, was much indebted to a Ryle tract, "Are you Forgiven?" for ability to start in that movement; and he has supported his share of it by translating about forty of the tracts into Spanish. One of these, "True Liberty", gained over to the cause a Mexican Roman Catholic priest of great ability – Manuel Agnas.

The Bishop's longer treatises and volumes are also numerous, occupying mainly the Stradbroke period; though, some are of later date. The Upper Room, a substantial volume, is a collection of papers, covering a period of forty-five years' ministry. Of an earlier work, entitled *Knots Untied*, it has been stated that at one time seven young men were known to be studying for holy orders, as the result of reading it. Of the volumes, perhaps the most popular has been *Christian Leaders of the Last Century*, sketching the lives of eleven eminent revivalists, with Whitefield and Wesley as their head; and his enthusiastic admiration of them is shared by most of his readers. We doubt, however, whether a still more valuable work is not the *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, as being more continually and lastingly in the readers' hands.

From the heart of East Anglia Mr Ryle spoke by his writings to all England, and to excellent purpose. Could he have done more good if the ambition of his early life had been realized? We doubt it; although, like his honoured father-in-law, J P Plumptre, Esq., he could have done much in the House of Commons. The Lord has granted unto him vastly more than he had lost; and as year after year has added to his new inheritance of usefulness, he must have ever found fresh reason to lift up his head with joy and still press forward.

After a period as honorary canon of Norwich (1872), in 1880 Ryle became the first bishop of Liverpool, at the recommendation of Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. His episcopate was marked by his efforts to build churches and mission halls to reach the rapidly expanding urban areas of the city.

Of his important diocese the special difficulties we understand are these:- Lancashire abounds with native English old Roman Catholic families: Liverpool teems with immigrant Irish ones; and with many Welsh house-holds who "know not" bishops. The princely merchants of the great city, who could spare their thousands as common men do guineas, are mostly from beyond the Tweed where they have known "presbyters" only. A bishop, therefore, in working the special organization of which he is in charge, is sorely straitened for means and countenance. Nevertheless, since his appointment, the first Bishop of Liverpool's great exertions have produced remarkable successes, which have found their way into the tables of the Year Book.

But there are also spiritual results, beyond the reach of tables, and we know that we are right in adding that never did Bishop more persistently than he, aim at these, in ordinations most particularly.

He retired in 1900 at age 83 and died later the same year in Lowestoft. His successor in Liverpool described him as ***'the man of granite with the heart of a child.'***