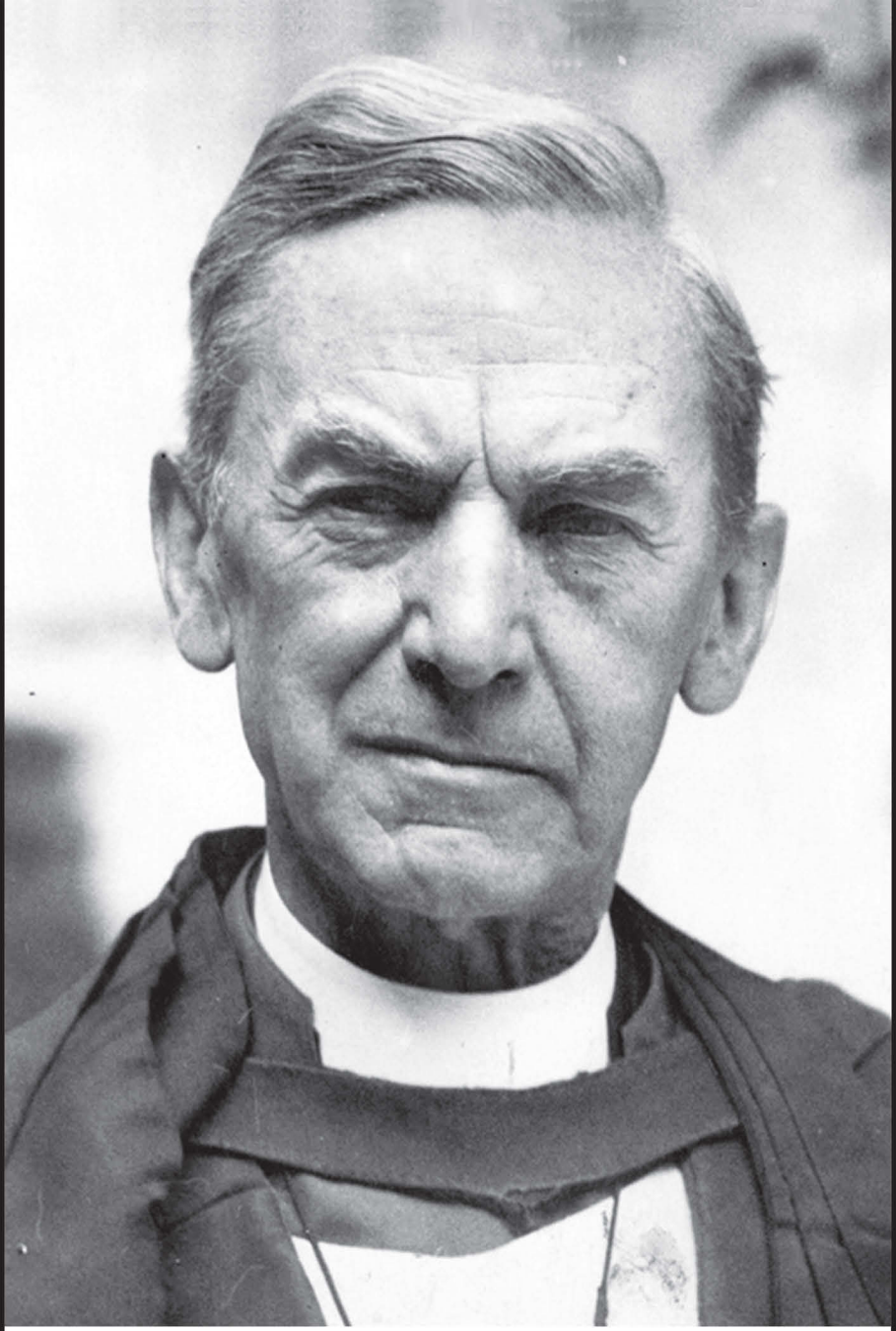

Herbert Hensley Henson

A Biography

John S. Peart-Binns

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Herbert Hensley Henson

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and

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To
Annis
with deep love and enduring gratitude

Acknowledgements

It is difficult to limit gratitude. In first place is Herbert Hensley Henson whose published and unpublished works have educated, strengthened and increased my interest in ecclesiastical history. My interest in Henson began forty-five years ago when I began to collect material which now fills twelve boxes. A considerable number of clergy and laity, admirers and critics alike, who knew Henson at different stages of his life, ministry and episcopate, sent valuable recollections, reflections and papers. I also benefited from meeting and corresponding with two of Henson's domestic chaplains, Lionel Trotman and Martin Ellingsen.

After the third volume of Henson's *Retrospect of an Unimportant Life* was published three years after his death in 1950, interest in him was kept alive by the publication of two volumes of his letters. However, it was not until 1983 that the Church's most prominent ecclesiastical historian, Owen Chadwick, was persuaded to write and publish *Hensley Henson: A Study in the Friction Between Church and State.* He prised open the door to reveal a complex figure and raised tantalising questions.

My biography of Henson is very largely based on primary material researched in the Cathedral Library of Durham Cathedral and Lambeth Palace Library whose archivists were wonderfully receptive and helpful to me.

In 2008 I was awarded an M.Phil. with distinction by the University of Leeds (School of History) for a Thesis on *Life, Thought and Work of Herbert Hensley Henson: Establishment and Disestablishment in the Church of England, 1886-1935*.

8 November 2013 marks the 150th anniversary of Henson's birth. It is a strange though accurate observation that much of Henson's thought and action have been circumvented rather than refuted by the Church of England ever since.

I bow to Bethany Churchard of The Lutterworth Press who has copy-edited the text with meticulous care and understanding.

None of my twenty biographies would have materialised in print without Annis, my wife. She has been responsible for checking manuscripts, suggesting amendments, insisting on deletions, re-checking, tweaking and polishing and after my beloved typewriter was taken to the crematorium taught me how to use a word-processor. This was a phenomenal achievement when this episcopographer is known to be a technological Luddite, computer illiterate who has never used or visited the parallel universe of the internet and its *octopi* offspring.

John S. Peart-Binns,
June 2013.

Preface

Herbert Hensley Henson (1863-1947) was, from 1920 to 1939, the eighty-sixth Bishop of Durham. He was the most distinctive, illustrious and formidable diocesan bishop of his time. He stood apart from his peers, his head erect among the episcopal ostriches. An impartial critic once described him sitting among his fellow-prelates 'like a cat among codfish'. He was largely self-educated, formed his own character, fashioned his own course and set out to conquer fortune by the force of his intellect, mingled with imagination, a combination of which qualities he was dangerously self-conscious. It was self-projection which made him the most feared, as well as the most admired, controversialist in the Church. He was completely independent of all organised opinion. With a mastery of dialectic and impatience with anything canting, pretentious or delusory, he isolated himself and on important issues usually voted in a minority of one. The colours of ink in which he dipped his quill ranged from dense black to patrician purple.

The Bishop of Durham is marked off from his episcopal colleagues by some honorific distinctions. He takes rank next to the Bishop of London: he is one of the three bishops who sit in the House of Lords by title of their Sees, not in order of consecration; in his official documents he uses a style commonly distinctive of the archbishops of Canterbury and York, writing himself bishop 'by Divine providence', not, as is usual, 'by Divine permission'; the mitre which surmounts the arms of the See is bound with a ducal coronet and he has the privilege of supporting the Sovereign on the right at a coronation. These distinctions may perhaps be regarded as the last surviving relics of the splendour of the Palatine jurisdiction which the Bishop of Durham, alone among the bishops of England, possessed from 1099 to 1836 when it expired with Bishop William Van Mildert who, two years earlier, had handed over Durham Castle to be the home of University College, reserving for himself and his successors the use of a few rooms. The Palatinate was founded before the Conquest, and organised in the twelfth century to be a kind of buffer state between England and Scotland, over which the

bishop ruled not only as a great spiritual magnate, but also as statesman, diplomat, even commander, capable of standing up against the enemy in the field, and the monarch in the council chamber. The diocese of Durham was a little kingdom equipped with the complete machinery of Government – courts civil and criminal, sheriffs and other officers, parliament, mint, prison and army.

Henson's presence is easily misinterpreted as being controlled to an uncommon degree by the power of history. Yet it was this capacity for identifying himself with all that had gone before which vested his utterances with a sonorous dignity, characteristics of a bygone age. The best description of Henson's physical appearance and impact is provided by Harold Begbie ('A gentleman with a duster'), in *Painted Windows: A Study of Religious Personality* (1922):

> Few men are more effective in soliloquy. It is a memorable sight to see him standing with his back to one of the high stone mantelpieces in Durham Castle, his feet wide apart on the hearth-rug, his hands in the opening of his apron, his trim and dapper body swaying ceaselessly from the waist, his head, with its smooth boyish hair, bending constantly forward, jerking every now and then to emphasise a point in argument, the light in his bright, watchful, sometimes mischievous eyes, dancing to the joy of his own voice, the thin lips working with pleasure as they give to all his words the fullest value of vowels and sibilants, the small greyish face, with its two slightly protruding teeth on the lower lip, almost quivering, almost glowing, with the rhythm of his sentences and the orderly sequence of his logic. All this composes a picture which one does not easily forget. It is like the harangue of a snake, which is more subtle than any beast of the field. One is conscious of a spell.
>
> The dark, tapestried room, the carved ceiling, the heavy furniture, the embrasured windows, the whole sombre magnificence of the historic setting, quiet, almost somnolent, with the enduring memories of Cuthbert Tunstall, Joseph Butler, J.B. Lightfoot and Brooke Foss Westcott, add a most telling vivacity to the slim and dominating figure of this boy-like bishop, who is so athletic in the use of his intellect and so happy in every thesis he sets himself to establish.
>
> It is an equally memorable sight to see him in his castle at Bishop Auckland in the role of host, entertaining people of intelligence with the history of the place, showing the pictures and the chapel, exhibiting curious relics of the past – a restless and energetic figure, holding its own in effectiveness against men of greater stature and more commanding presence by an inward force which has something of the tag of a twitching bowstring.

Henson enriched his fancy from the persons he met, the scenes he witnessed, the enterprises in which he engaged, the convictions he made his own, the prejudices he acquired, the victories he celebrated and the defeats he suffered. These he published in books, articles, letters, and most conspicuously in his three-volume autobiography, *Retrospect of an Unimportant Life* (1942, 1943, 1950) based on a minute number of entries from his journal, written daily, with some gaps, in 101 books from 12 May 1885 to 7 April 1947. On its own *Retrospect* is not a balanced statement of objective fact for, throughout, personal judgement predominates. It reveals and conceals Henson. Indeed he suppresses the traumas of his background and early life from everyone by building himself a fortress and wearing armour as thick as a tank. The person inside is impenetrable. Only a very few close intimates were allowed a glimpse of a deeply sensitive person, perhaps the result of a craving for the praise and love which were absent from his early life. To an extent these circumstances stimulated a monstrous and morbid egotism. One consequence and foible was an insatiable desire to be noticed. He became a walking arsenal of erudition with a talent for arranging words in memorable sequences and, when heated by argument, was a furnace for roasting opponents. There are occasions when *Retrospect* is not simply self-denying but mentally dishonest. Reading unpublished entries in his journal restores and confirms Henson's integrity and also reveals a less confident person.

Henson's output abounds in pithy sayings, vivid pictures and virile reasoning. His style is lucid, strong, witty, sometimes biting and bitter, never sentimental, verbose or artificial. His scorn for whatever was unreal or ostentatious, or merely conventional, adds a cutting edge to his phrases. He was adept at exposing hypocrisy and flattening folly. In *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) T.S. Eliot noted: 'I must take this opportunity for calling attention to the great excellence of Bishop Hensley Henson's prose, whether it is employed in a volume prepared at leisure, or in an occasional letter to *The Times*. For vigour and purity of controversial English, he has no superior today, and his writings should long continue to be studied by those who aspire to write well.' Henson's seventy-five books, pamphlets and Open Letters; major articles in a variety of journals; *The Bishoprick* (quarterly); published letters (over five hundred in *The Times* alone), covered all the decisive, divisive and momentous events affecting the Church and the Nation from 1887 onwards.

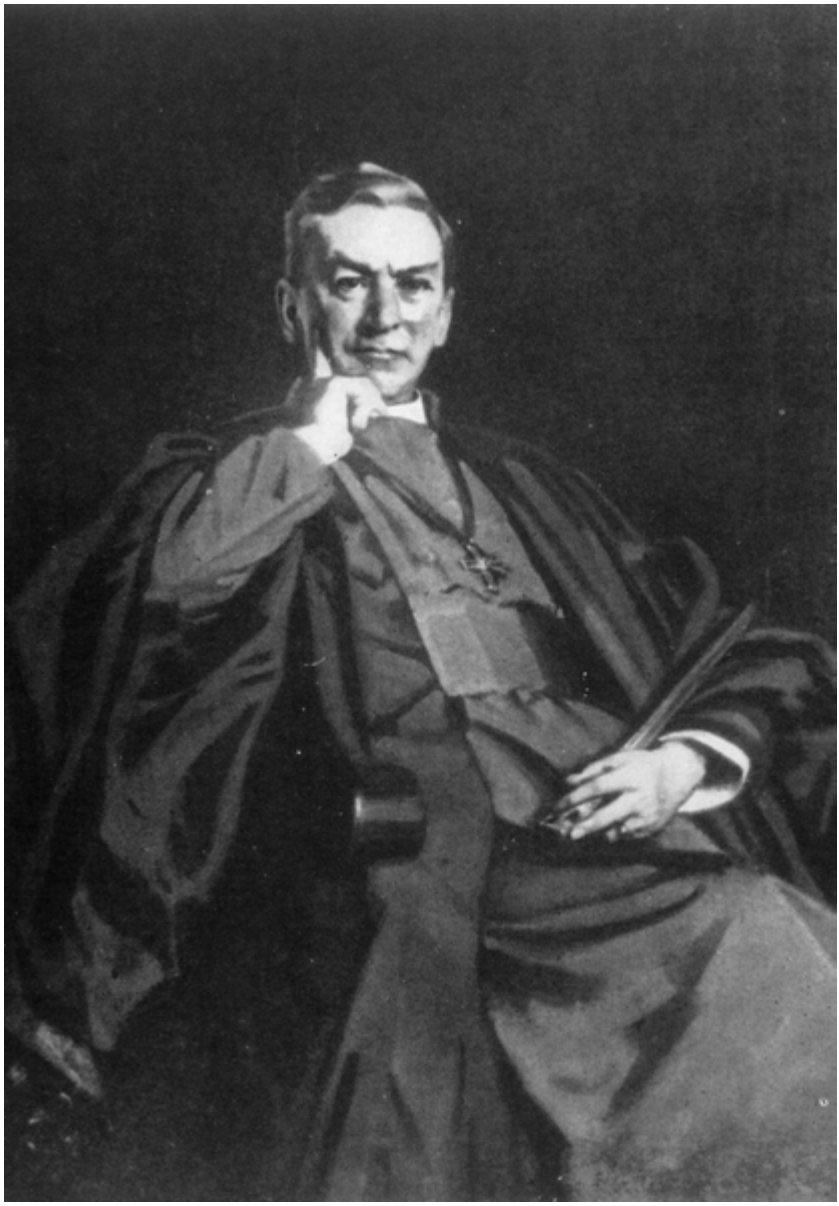
Henson was renowned as a preacher in the pulpit and speaker on the platform. The Chamber in the House of Lords filled rather than emptied when this Lord Spiritual spoke or intervened in debates. Queues often formed to hear Henson preach during his years as a

Canon of Westminster Abbey and Rector of St Margaret's (1900 to 1912). He was one of the few pulpit orators whose sermons transferred to print without betraying any of the looseness of texture or diffusion of language which are the snares of spoken rhetoric. A witness was at first puzzled by his compelling attraction:

> Apart from his perfection of literary form it is difficult to account for Dr Henson's eminence as a preacher. Listeners will remember a figure rigidified by the necessity of following a written text, a reedy voice with no charm but that of an exquisitely clean-cut enunciation, a very sharp gesture, short and sharp, like a sword-thrust, an abstinence from the histrionic arts of weighted pause and changed intonation. In recompense for their want was an intensity, a searching sincerity, a disinfectant irony at times of voice and manner – in brief, that elusive quality of 'personality' which is the secret of power alike in churches, parliament and theatres. It is also the quality that provokes hostility, and it is not surprising to read of bitter opposition to the man and his message.

Henson was a serial tergiversator. He disliked the partisan title 'Anglo-Catholic' so called himself an 'English Catholic' at Barking where he was an authoritarian traditionalist and spat venom at Dissenters. By the time he had reached Westminster he had outgrown his belief in the Apostolic Succession and made public his *volte-face* in a series of sermons in Westminster Abbey: 'I started on the assumption of the High Church Party – that the Apostolic Succession is vitally necessary to a Christian Church. Experience destroyed the conviction; inquiry dispersed the theory. I now know that ecclesiastical organization is not primary, and I drew the inference frankly'. When he climbed into the pulpit of Great St Mary's, Cambridge, on 20 October 1901 he made an 'Appeal for Unity' as he ardently promoted the reunion of the Church of England with other Churches of the Reformation: 'I crossed the Rubicon which divides 'Catholicism' from Protestantism'. In truth Henson was asserting the plenary right of the individual conscience against the aggression of external authority however designated.

Above all else, after spending most of his life as a formidable bulwark of Establishment, the later years found him the foremost proponent of Disestablishment. This was the result of a gradual, almost seamless, development from The Enabling Act of 1919, not a sudden dramatic conversion after the 1927/1928 Revised Prayer Book debacle. On the morrow of the rejection the first verse of Psalm 79, the first prescribed psalm for Morning Prayer, was recited by Henson: 'O God, the heathen are come into thine inheritance'. Where matters of real principle are involved and whenever the current of opinion is flowing strongly in one direction it is imperative that people of learning and ability should be



From the portrait by Harold Speed
in the State Room of Aukland Castle, 1929

found to be swimming against it. That service Henson rendered to his generation. It is of minor consequence that he failed to persuade the majority. There are moments in history where it is more important that a person should swim against the current than that he should turn the tide.

Henson was referred to as 'a Jacobin lacquered over to look like a Tory'. He described himself as 'a latitude man who had strayed out of the seventeenth century into the twentieth'. Isolation gave that stormy petrel and staunch individualist a peculiar cogency and vigour to his advocacy and was responsible for his fearless courage. He deliberately courted controversy with an implacable antipathy to Russian Communism, Roman Catholicism, the Labour Party, Christian Socialism, moral rearmament, spiritual exhibitionism, dismemberment of ancient dioceses, spiritual healing, patronage trusts, and the policy of prohibition. His forthright views on education, marriage and divorce, miners and trade unions were proclaimed nationally.

Henson the controversialist is apt to claim the historian's mind. There is another legacy. Henson had a special devotion to two pastoral classics, *The Country Parson, his Character and Rule of Holy Life* (1652) by George Herbert, and *The Reformed Pastor* (1656) by Richard Baxter. In 1958 Michael Ramsey, then Archbishop of York, drew attention to Henson's two volumes of Ordination Charges *Church and Parson in England* (1927) and *Ad Clerum* (1937, re-issued 1958) which he considered 'take their place in the line of great English works on the pastoral office. . . . Those who were brought nearest to him in his episcopal character cherished most of all his pastoral wisdom and sympathy'. In the published and unpublished Charges a different Henson surfaces: a father-in-God to his clergy and a pastoral bishop. This is documented and testified in this biography

Henson was not blind to his foibles and failings. In his journal he continually questioned whether the decisions he made and the directions he took were right, worthy or wise. Should he have been ordained; should he have remained single and celibate; should he have spent such an inordinate amount of time and energy devoted to the preparation and delivery of sermons? Would he leave any abiding work? Was his journal 'the humiliating monument of sterile egotism, the melancholy achievement of self-deluding labour'? In 1928 he wondered: 'Is it a quixotic sincerity which compels me to blurt out in unmistakeable decisiveness, the sentiments which, at the moment, reign in my mind? Or is it, as my enemies affirm, a demonical fondness for the *guardia certaminis*? Or is it a fatal Cassandra-like clearness of temperament, at once loyal and reckless, brave and yielding, far-seeing and absorbed in immediate situations, an amalgam of all that is most estimable with all that is least trustworthy?'.

When Henson's official portrait was painted by Harold Speed in 1929 the sword of Anthony Bec, Bishop of Durham 1284-1311, was substituted for the more conventional book and Henson preferred to be painted in a preacher's gown rather than in the more familiar red and white convocation dress.

What may be concluded of Henson's spiritual odyssey? *Retrospect* provides hints and guesses as to his inner life but only unpublished journal entries and some of his letters open the door to an un-absolved penitent. Here may be encountered the mysterious influence of a hidden life of prayer, of self-examination, self-abasement and self-oblation. Constant journal entries reveal inner conflict and confusion, doubt and inconsistency. Henson deeply feared Christ's judgment. Throughout his ministry his uppermost plea was, 'O God I beseech Thee, look with compassion on my faults and failings'.

The Church of England is the most curious and chaotically comprehensive Church in Christendom. It makes assertions of authority and harbours extreme individualism. Yet with all its deficiencies there is much in the Church that is special and precious. Whatever the faults of its system, and they are apparent and extreme; whatever the scandals of its history, and they have been many and gross; whatever the failures of its bishops, and they have been frequent and disastrous, this at least may be claimed, that Christ has owned the Church of England by many infallible tokens of His Presence within it, as may be discovered in the life, thought, ministry and episcopate of Henson.

The aim of *Herbert Hensley Henson: A Biography* is to remove an episcopal gargoyle and provide a permanent and deserved niche for Henson in the history of the Church.

1. Precocious Prodigy

Retrospect opens with a defiant statement: 'I belong to the middle-class and to the soundest part of it, namely, that which from time immemorial has lived and worked in the country'. But Henson had never lived or worked in the country and his consciousness of 'class' grew from a 'chip' on his shoulder to a disfiguring carbuncle in his psyche. True, his ancestry was rural stock, first resting in the Anglo-Saxon village of Porlock in Somerset then, from the late eighteenth century, in Morebath, near Tiverton in North Devon. His great-grandfather and grandfather farmed the land at Loxton Farm in Morebath, a parish known now for the records that were kept during turbulent Reformation times from 1529 to 1574. Each was well known in the village of approximately two hundred inhabitants and both served as churchwardens in the parish church of St George.

Henson's father, Thomas, was born in Morebath in 1812 and had no intention of adapting to a life of farming drudgery. When he was in his late teens he quarrelled with his father and left home for London to find work and seek his fortune. There are numerous descriptions of his occupations: 'warehouseman', 'outfitter', and the 1871 census records him deriving his income from 'property'. He was clearly successful in various businesses as he was able to retire in 1865, aged fifty-three, and buy Vale Villa, a large modern house with a landscaped garden and fruit trees in Broadstairs in Kent. He knew how to use or manipulate people to assist him financially and breathe wealth into a number of flourishing business enterprises. But he borrowed money he was incapable of repaying and sank into substantial debt.

Thomas had married Mary Ann Holloway at St Pancras Chapel on 17 January 1839. She died young without issue. The 1851 Census records him living in St Pancras in a house owned by Mary Ann Fear (b. 1806) and her daughters Martha Tyler and Mary Ann. Thomas Henson married Martha Tyler Fear at St Alphage's Church,

Greenwich on 31 August 1852. He was forty, his new wife twenty-two. They lived at various addresses in London and Kent. There were eight children of the union, six boys and two girls.

Herbert Hensley Henson, the sixth child and fourth boy, was born on 8 November 1863. He inherited the name Hensley from an aunt, Emma Hensley Long. His mother died in January 1870 when he was six. He held on to an idealistic view of her, claiming 'with her died our happiness'. While she lived the detrimental changes in her husband's religious practices were camouflaged. For some time Thomas, long bearded and patriarchal in looks, trawled places of worship in London to hear evangelical and revivalist preachers. He fell under the spell of the Revd Baptist Noel, a mesmeric Evangelical preacher whose fervour and eloquence at the unconsecrated St John's Chapel, Bedford Row, attracted crowds to hear his God-fearing and Calvinistic message. Noel's influence was increased when his secession from the Church of England was announced dramatically by his public re-baptism by immersion in the neighbouring Baptist Chapel on 9 August 1849. His secession had been preceded by the violent controversy on baptismal regeneration aroused by the refusal of the Bishop of Exeter, Henry Phillpotts, to institute the Revd G.C. Gorham to the Living of Brampford Speke on the grounds of his doctrinal unsoundness with respect to that specific doctrine of the Church of England. It is odd that the same incident which drove some Anglican clergy, including Henry Manning, into the Roman Catholic, 'Popish', Communion, drove others into denominational nonconformity. Though Thomas Henson remained nominally a member of the Church of England he did not allow his four younger children to be baptised.

Thomas Henson was unable to bring up his large family without help. For a time Herbert and his brother Arthur were sent to live in the house of the long-serving Congregational minister, Augustus Frederick Bennett, a mild scholarly man whom they liked but with a wife they hated. Thomas Henson even gave land to the Congregationalists to build a chapel. In the Henson household the father ruled, imposing the strictest puritanical discipline which became narrower and darker. Thomas abandoned Congregationalism and transferred his allegiance to the Christian or Plymouth Brethren where he became a rigorous disciple. The Brethren was formed in the mid-1820s and attracted an educated membership with a somewhat aristocratic veneer. Ironically, business-men like Thomas joined where they found a brotherly love and support, similar to free-masonry. Their beliefs and structure were a world-denying pietism with the Bible as their supreme rule; an interest in prophecy and the Second Coming; believer's baptism; weekly breaking of bread; no set liturgy; no ordained ministry though many full-time

evangelists; a congregational polity with no co-ordinating organization. They spread steadily. The pietism and prophecy of the Brotherhood intensified Thomas Henson's bleak outlook on the world and increased a feeling of urgency to be prepared for the Second Coming. Is it any wonder that the darkness at home become all-pervading? In view of their father's contempt for the wickedness of the world, life at home for the children was purgatory. They were not to be tarnished by attending the schools where corruption was rife. The undercurrents in Herbert's early life were never completely expunged.

In 1873 childhood misery and deprivation were unexpectedly relieved and, to an extent, transformed when his father married Emma Theodore Parker, thirty years his junior: the widow of a German Lutheran pastor in Stuttgart. She herself was a devout Lutheran. There is no record of a 'legal' marriage as the Brethren disapproved of legal ceremonies. An immediate positive outcome, with lasting results, was Henson's access to his father's library where his religious interests had led him to accumulate a large collection of theological and philosophical books. Herbert immersed himself in the books so that by the age of fourteen this prodigious boy had read as deeply in divinity as many men taking holy orders. He was attracted to the Old Testament like iron filings to a magnet and, with a retentive memory, was able to recite all one hundred and fifty psalms by heart. The markedly pessimistic tone of Edward Gibbon's proclaimed work of literature and history *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-89) in six volumes stuck in his mind. There was an abundance of seventeenth, eighteenth, even nineteenth-century authors, including John Milton (*Paradise Lost*, 1667, was a favourite) and John Bunyan's *Pilgrims' Progress* (1678). Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563) by the sixteenth century martyrologist, appealed for extolling the heroism and endurance of the Protestant martyrs of Mary's reign, all victims of 'Papist' tyranny. The English theologian William Paley's *Evidences of Christianity* (1802) also appealed for its presentation of facts and its pellucid style. The effectiveness of satire entered Herbert's thinking through Thomas Fuller, notably *Andronicus* (1659) directed at Oliver Cromwell. The works of Archbishop Robert Leighton (1611-84) and Edmund Spenser (1552-99) were well-thumbed. William Cowper was much quoted in Henson's published work. The conversion to Christianity of John Newton (1725-1807) who became an Anglican Divine appealed, even though theologically he was a pronounced Calvinist. Herbert was drawn to Bishop Gilbert Burnet of Salisbury (1643-1715), a Reformation historian, Whig in politics and latitudinarian in theology, who had the confidence of William of Orange and Mary. Perhaps the most lasting influence was the English moral philosopher and theologian, Joseph Butler (1692-1752). The

young admirer recognised his hero's grasp of principle and sustained reasoning and above all his contribution to the deistic controversy stressing the role of conscience in *Fifteen Sermons* (1726) and *The Analogy of Religion* (1736). Butler was Bishop of Durham from 1750 to 1752. Henson's step-mother introduced him to the works of Walter Scott (1771-1832). Translations of Greek historians and philosophers, such as Thucydides, Pericles and Aeschylus, were special. Henson made an observation about his childhood which shows self-knowledge: 'I was oddly external to my own environment, and insensibly formed the habit of detached observation, and even critical appraisement'.

Henson grew bolder at home, including acts of rebellion against his father. He walked over to the Roman Catholic Church of St Augustine in Ramsgate, finding its 'sombre dignity' attractive and its stillness 'mysterious and other-worldly'. It suggested a religion 'wonderfully unlike that which offended me so much in my Protestant home'. These clandestine visits came to an abrupt halt when a nosy neighbour reported them to his father who had a hatred of 'papists'. When Henson went abroad for the first time he stayed in Munich with his stepmother's sister who had married a devout Roman Catholic. He says, 'The spectacle of Roman religion as it was disclosed in the Rhineland and in Bavaria both attracted and repelled me', but verses written in his notebooks at the time suggest more the former than the latter. When he heard of a Mission in Ramsgate led by a layman, Captain Field, he went to hear him.

> I was not converted, but I was considerably impressed and predisposed to respond to the appeal for Confirmation candidates which was about that time made in the parish church of Broadstairs. But Confirmation implied Baptism, and I was not baptized. My own insistence, strongly supported by my step-mother, overcame my father's reluctance, and he took advantage of a holiday which we spent in the rural parish of Minster-in-Thanet to arrange for my Baptism in the glorious parish church. The Vicar at that time was an excellent Evangelical clergyman named Gell. I had no godparents, but answered for myself; and I well remember how the Vicar walked with me after the service, and the earnestness with which he urged on me the significance of my baptismal vows. Thus insistently was the problem of baptism forced on my mind, and it made a deep impression.
>
> When I returned to Broadstairs after my baptism, I was accepted by the Rector as a candidate for Confirmation. About this time my family left Broadstairs and went to reside in a comfortable house not far from Pegwell Bay, near enough to Ramsgate to admit of attendance at Christ Church, where an