



STEPHEN NEILL

*Shelburne Studios*

## STEPHEN CHARLES NEILL

1900-1984

Being of a radically sceptical temper, I still wake up about three mornings a week saying: 'Of course it could not possibly be true'. But then common sense comes to my rescue saying: 'Who are you to decide what is and what is not possible in this wonderful world that God has given us?' So to my great annoyance I find myself singing: 'Thou only art holy, Thou only art the Lord, Thou only, O Christ, with the Holy Ghost, art most high in the glory of God the Father'.

IN the context where we find it, this piece of self-revelation may well be taken as quizzical. For the appeal to common sense in these terms, on this theme, would hardly be said to satisfy the *radically* sceptical. From every evidence of his masterly competence and, most of all, from his response to India which was his first and greatest love, it seems clear that Stephen Neill remained throughout his 83 years heir and then servant of a staunch tradition, robustly Christian both in intellectual quality and pastoral energy. He was a practitioner of faith with a world-wide parish both in academies and churches, colleges and councils. He wrote extensively in the fields of Biblical scholarship, ecumenical history, pastoral psychology, and general theology, and all with a formidable confidence, sustained by linguistic competence in the Biblical and classical languages and several modern ones. Though the stature he possessed never received, for reasons dating from India in 1944, the recognition of commensurate office, he made his own place in the affection and reliance of an ecumenical constituency in which the Anglicanism he so cherished and exemplified found an even wider fulfilment. It was this grateful acceptance, which cheered and sustained him and to which he gave tireless, peripatetic devotion in the second half of his career, that compensated for the pains and tensions of a much suffering man. The hint, in the quotation above, of an early wakefulness, only hides a frequent insomnia which a sharp questioning filled and a brave reassurance surmounted.

The 'common sense', as he chose to call it, derived from a strong Irish evangelicalism. Born, as he loved to point out, on the last day of the nineteenth century, 31 December 1900, of missionary parents, the Revd Charles Neill and Margaret Penelope (née Monro), he was nurtured in familial love to India and to mission.

These became the guiding loves of his whole career. After schooling at Dean Close School, Cheltenham, he took Firsts in the Classical and Theological Triposes, at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1922 and 1923. He carried off a variety of Prizes and crowned his Cambridge career with a Fellowship at Trinity, with a dissertation on the inter-action between Neoplatonism and the Fathers in the fourth century.

In 1838 A. Jahn published a supplement to Creuzer's edition of Plotinus in which he pointed to the clear use of Plotinus' tract on the three primary hypostases (*Enneads*, v, 1) in a little treatise on the Holy Spirit attached to the fifth book of Basil's *Contra Eunomium*. But remarkably little further work was done to follow up the observation during the nineteenth century. In 1921 Werner Jaeger published his classic edition of Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, and the long book found an avid reader in Stephen Neill. It seemed to him exciting that a distinguished German classical scholar had devoted himself to the elucidating and editing of a Christian text; for Stephen's classical education had been imparted by scholars inclined to set aside the Christians as somehow belonging to the world of 'oriental barbarism' which Greek rationality and philosophy existed to combat. The latent (in some cases explicit) anti-semitism underlying this humanist attitude was not uncommon among some German and British scholars of the age. As Neill read Gregory of Nyssa, he found his mind frequently reminded of what he had read in Plotinus, the philosopher of whom W. R. Inge had very recently written a brilliant, if somewhat christianizing, portrait.

His fellowship dissertation was accordingly a detailed demonstration of a proposition which more modern technical scholarship<sup>1</sup> has established for certain, namely that the three 'Cappadocian Fathers', Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa, were all, in differing degrees, under the philosophical influence of Plotinus and his pupil Porphyry.

Who were his mentors is not quite certain. In classics he was under Ernest Harrison, Cornford, and Donald Robertson. Alexander Nairne was for the later part of his time the Regius Professor of Divinity, not a specially original scholar but a man of infinite charm and other-worldly goodness; and Neill once called him 'my beloved teacher'. He talked also of his friendship with Clement Hoskyns. These names suggest two things; first that he was concentrating on the study of the New Testament; and secondly that

<sup>1</sup> Paul Henry, *Les États du texte de Plotin* (Paris, 1938); Hans Dehnhard, *Das Problem der Abhängigkeit des Basiliius von Plotin* (Berlin, 1964).

the boy from a very Biblical quasi-fundamentalist family now felt at ease in a much wider and more liberal divinity. The process of intellectual emancipation from his father led for a time to tension between father and son. His main student rivals were A. D. Nock, later the eminent student of early Christianity and mystery religions, and Professor at Harvard; and Patrick Duff with whom he had a close undergraduate friendship (they breakfasted together every day) and who later became Regius Professor of Civil Law at Cambridge.

Neill schooled himself in the subtleties of Plotinus and learned his steadfast pastoral intellectualism, as he recalled, from the sermons and letters of the apostolic Fathers. He also gained a lively sense of the theological significance of ancient liturgies.

These academic skills found exciting fulfilment in the wake of the surprising decision he made in 1924 to leave the prestige and calm of the Great Court at Trinity for membership of the Church Missionary Society in South India. It was a dramatic and public moment; there was even a meeting in the Examination Hall to say farewell and Godspeed, with the Master of Trinity (J. J. Thomson) in the chair. In South India he immersed himself in Tamil, a language in which he became altogether expert. He learned to express Christian truth in the simplest possible form and informed himself efficiently in the lore of Hinduism, with special reference to the Rig Veda, Saiva Siddhanta, and Bhakti devotion. 'Efficiently' is perhaps a just word, for there is little index in his writing about India and Hinduism to suggest that he ever responded to it in the terms of Christian self-interrogation. But he did register, as a historian of Christianity in India, that there was an urgent need to rethink Christian theology in contact with other faiths and that little could be had in respect of this vocation from the apostolic Fathers.

Although he did not pursue this expertise in Hinduism to the point of publication, a professional in the subject heard him read a paper, late in life, expounding certain Sanskrit texts, and thought the performance profound and original.

He worked in the dioceses of Tinnevely and Travancore from 1924 to 1930, and for the next eight years was Warden of Tirumaraiur, a theological college which he built near Nazareth. From this post he was elected Bishop of Tinnevely in 1939. His six-year episcopate brought to a splendid climax the first half of his career. In both College and Diocese he set himself and his clergy exacting standards of pastoral energy and spiritual nurture. These are mirrored in six of his earliest publications: *How Readest Thou?*

*A Simple Introduction to the New Testament* (1925); *Out of Bondage* (1928); *Builders of the Indian Church* (1934); *Annals of an Indian Parish* (1934); *Beliefs* (1940); *Foundation Beliefs* (1942). He was tireless in his stimulus to village pastors and unsparing in his travels (mostly by bicycle). There was a sense of *élan* in the leadership he brought, in a pioneer situation, as the youngest bishop in the Anglican Communion. He played a strong part in the initiation of studies and negotiations for the formation (in 1947) of the Church of South India.

These little Indian books ought not to be neglected. They are indispensable to understanding the heart of the man and why he came to love India. Some enchanting writing is enshrined in *Annals*, or *Out of Bondage*; a portrait of village India so graphic that the reader can scent the smells, hear the drums, and feel the affections and gratitudes.

He launched a series of books on theology in Tamil. The series continues today.

Neill was the most powerful intellectual force which the Church of India had seen since W. H. Mill in the earlier nineteenth century. Whether he overworked is not certain. To friends he always gave the impression of a man without strain or worry who could work longer hours than most. Inside, he felt deeply, was moved by friendships, which meant much to him, and was thrown emotionally for a time by calamities. It is probable that the long hours of work took their toll in some undiagnosed form. He became liable to shattering headaches and during the next twenty years he had difficulty in sleeping. Before long his mind began to show signs of unbalance, and to cause anxiety to his colleagues.

In 1944 he went on furlough to England to get medical treatment. While he was there the Indian bishops met and decided to advise Neill to retire from his see. The advice came as a shock to him and his resignation was certainly the hardest decision he ever made. He loved India, and had a sense of a vocation to serve that country. He seemed to be destroying his past and the trauma of this decision remained with him to the end of his life.

Perhaps the surest way to characterize the close of one career as the threshold of another is to cite his own abstract discussion of personal crises in his *A Genuinely Human Existence* published fourteen years later in 1959. It was characteristic of him that he should plunge into a serious academic study of the relationship between Christianity and psychology, which also included *A Christian Approach to Psychology* (1949). The book of 1959 was as thorough and competent a piece of writing as any in his immediate

academic fields. There *is*, he insisted, 'a reality of permanent and irreparable loss'. We must live within the limits of what is possible for us, being neither escapist nor melancholy.

There is no frustration which, if calmly and imaginatively accepted, cannot be turned to creative use, no rind so bitter that it cannot be found to conceal sweet fruit within . . . When the handicap is inward and invisible it is lonelier and even harder. The man or woman who accepts some irreparable loss . . . and makes a career and a character in spite of it is likely to have little recognition other than the hidden voice of conscience: yet some who have no idea of the price that has been paid may be aware of some special strength or sweetness of character for which they can find no ready explanation.

'Few men', he averred in *On the Ministry* (p. 34), 'have any new ideas after the age of forty.' Nevertheless, 'let us be prepared to begin again at the beginning.'

Obviously he could take up again the career which he sacrificed in 1924. He reappeared in Cambridge and the Faculty of Divinity was thankful at once to appoint him to a lectureship. His college immediately appointed him chaplain, but a little pointedly failed to make him again a Fellow.

Because in his mind or memory there was something doubtful about the bishopric, he was careful for the rest of his life to be a bishop. Though once a strong evangelical, and now a liberal with evangelical sympathies, he had a sense of indelible order. He wore a bishop's ring, and a purple stock, or in church the rochet and lawn sleeves, and always signed himself as a bishop. Few things pleased him more than to be asked to celebrate a sacrament special to bishops like confirmation. Everyone called him, and thought of him, as Bishop Neill, except the prosaic clerks of the University of Cambridge, who insisted that in the lecture list he was Mr Neill.

His routine lectures to undergraduates were partly in the New Testament (Romans or Corinthians) and partly in the history of Christian doctrine, especially the changing ideas of church and ministry through the centuries. But what took Cambridge by storm were his general lectures, at the unpromising hour of noon on Saturdays. Here for the first time appeared the future statesman of world-wide Christianity. He lectured on 'The Christian World Community'. He loved history more than theology proper and he had a sense of Christianity spreading across the globe, and soon grew to be the principal chronicler and interpreter of that expansion. He had a wonderful gift of lucid exposition, without any notes if he wished, a superb memory for

detail, and a very wide reading. Someone who heard him preach the university sermon in Great St Mary's Church in May 1948—on a decolonizing world and Christian expansion—said afterwards that he had just heard a man preach for nearly an hour and staggered himself by wanting him not to stop. Neill fascinated the undergraduates and soon he was famous in Cambridge and England as a lecturer and preacher.

Behind the scenes his health was still troublesome. But he was most kind to the young, fostered youthful scholarship wherever he found it, and was the principal voice of that wave of Christian feeling that swept the universities in their reaction against Nazi philosophy and World War. Perhaps he had a little sense of frustration. A man who can hold audiences of 2,000 and knows it may not easily settle down to the dust of academic life. His mind was still set upon the Church at large. 'I cannot settle down', he wrote later, at a time when he was at last a professor 'to being a pure academic, and I must have some directly spiritual work in order to keep alive and well.' In 1947 he refused with only a little hesitation a suggestion that he should become the Master of Selwyn College, Cambridge.

By that time the coming World Council of Churches and the Archbishop of Canterbury had seized him. In January 1947 he became Assistant Bishop to the Archbishop of Canterbury. It was announced that he would represent the archbishop in the affairs of the continental Churches of northern and central Europe, especially in Germany, and would act as liaison officer between the archbishop and the World Council of Churches in Geneva. In June 1947 he moved from his rooms in Trinity and acquired a flat in Geneva.

In this new capacity he was important again to India. At the Lambeth Conference of 1948 he was the drafter of the crucial resolutions on the Church of South India. In the same year he was the drafter of the section on evangelism at the first meeting of the World Council in Amsterdam. During 1950 he had the task of surveying theological education across Africa and from that moment one of his aims was to raise the standard of academic training for African clergy.

Early in 1950 there was serious talk at Cambridge that he would become the new Regius Professor of Divinity. This was a tribute to the comet-like brilliance of his recent passage across the Cambridge firmament, for it was not customary to consider for a chair someone whose only serious work lay unpublished in the university library. But some members of the faculty were nervous about

him; the absence of publication was serious; and the circumstances would hardly have made it possible for him to accept an invitation. The chair went to A. M. Ramsey.

Now came the second calamity. He spent part of 1950 under treatment. The old signs of unbalance showed, especially on occasions when the atmosphere was strained or fervid; and among the days of a public evangelist occasions of fervour recurred. Finally the archbishop asked him to resign. He did so in February 1951.

It looked as though these events had the making of high tragedy. A bishop equal in ability to any bishop in the world; a speaker, preacher, lecturer as compelling as any in the world—was he unusable because of health? During 1951 he had more treatment. He had turned his back on academic life. He could not be a bishop (except as a man in bishop's orders). He could not be an evangelist. He could not be an ecumenical leader.

The situation was saved, partly by himself. He settled down to write popular books to inform the Third World about Christian truths and ethics. In 1952 he started, with friends, in connection with the International Missionary Council, a publishing venture, World Christian Books. He was general editor 1952–62 and director 1962–70 before he and the others closed it down after publishing seventy books. He concerted a long series of basic simple books in theology, church history, and ethics, capable of being readily translated into a variety of world languages for the nurture of simple believers and the stimulus of active clergy. Several he wrote himself. The project did much for the furtherance of Christian education in five continents and gave new fulfilment to his concern in Tinnevely for an articulate faith among the rarely or barely literate. He also helped with the editing of the *Ecumenical Review*.

In the midst of these popularizing endeavours he edited, with Ruth Rouse, a fundamental contribution to historical studies: *The History of the Ecumenical Movement*, published in 1954. The evidence is that with this volume and its high standards in an area so far unresearched he had much to do. The most widely read of the many books of this phase of his life was probably the *Pelican Anglicanism* (1958). It was beautifully done, and is still much in demand.

The books were many. They betrayed quality and originality and standards. And they opened the way to a revival of the career on which he turned his back in 1947. In 1962 he was invited to the chair of Christian Missions and Ecumenical Theology at the



University of Hamburg. This was a prestigious chair. Its previous occupant was Walter Freytag, the eminent missiologist.

Technically Neill was a titular professor but it made no difference to his work. He had a fluent command of the German language; in seminars he sometimes spoke English sentences but he answered or asked questions in idiomatic German whenever he wished.

At the age of 62, therefore, Neill came at last into a professorship, into an academic company of the highest standards, and to immediate and continuous access to a great library, and to leisure. Whatever he was to write still had a non-academic motive—to explain the world-wide Church to itself and get it to see the truth or truths about itself. But the quality of the books which he published changed. Always his mind had been original. He could not write a popularizing book and be second-hand. But now the professor at Hamburg made that series of contributions to knowledge which in seven years brought him election to the British Academy.

He had a new subject; for which he was probably the only living person capable. Europe was falling, the world of the colonialists was over. The expansion of Christianity into Latin America, India, Africa, or China had often been seen as a facet of colonial power. What were the consequences for Christianity in the Third World of the decline of Europe? To this problem, and the related problem of the past, to what extent Christian missions depended on political power from the West, he devoted most of the rest of his life.

The Pelican *History of Christian Missions* (1964) could have been written by no one else of his generation. The expert parts were the Indian passages and the studies of ecumenical matters. But this was the first book into which he put a lifetime of hard reading in several languages and from every continent. In 1966 he published *Colonialism and Christian Mission* and in the same year *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861 to 1961*, an original contribution to the history of exegesis at a period of revolution for the Christian intelligence. In 1968 he published the Oxford Bampton Lectures, *Church and Christian Union*, in which the structure of the Church in ministry and organization was examined in an ecumenical context.

At the end of 1967 he was 67. His Hamburg professorship ended on the last day of the year, which was earlier than he expected. He meant to retire to write the history of his first love, Christianity and India. In May 1969 the University of Nairobi invited him,

despite his age, to a chair of Religious Studies, to set up a department of philosophy and religion within the faculty of arts.

He seemed to be changing from one professorship to another. But he moved to a different kind of work. At Nairobi he had to build everything. At first he had not even an office or a telephone, and he found hardly any books in the library. No one was more capable of teaching all knowledge at the drop of a hat. He lectured on philosophy of religion while there was no philosopher, methods of religious education ('which I know nothing about'), the Old Testament because the visiting professor fell ill, Greek because he ought, and Religion in the Modern World because he wanted; in spare time he lectured on the Wisdom of India, Pioneers of Thought, or anything that he thought would interest the general student. In 1972, at the age of 71, he was doing 18 hours a week in class—'Giving so many bad and ill-prepared lectures is bad for the soul'.

The time was not easy. The University needed to Africanize, and it was not comfortable, in an age of student unsettlement across the world, to be a European, even a European who greatly enjoyed African students. Though he was a wonderful drafter of minutes, or reports, he was never good on committees, and to build a new department in a young university, or in a university, needed infinite committees. All the denominations of Kenya wanted his sermons. One day he baptised 222 babies in a village church. In short he was again working too hard, and for all his physical strength was not young. The insomnia was again perturbing and there were those who thought they spotted a much less severe recurrence of the unbalance of earlier life. He did not quite like it when the tenure of his chair expired in 1973 but somehow it was a relief. 'I always find it tiring to lecture on subjects I know nothing about.' In his spare time between meetings, in the exiguous office at Nairobi or on the Zomba plateau in Malawi, he wrote a study of the theology and ethics of the New Testament and sent it home to Professor C. F. D. Moule to vet. It was published in 1976 under the title *Jesus through many Eyes*. He greatly valued, astoundingly for one who already held eight honorary doctorates, the Cambridge DD which he took at the age of 79, and for the first time began to call himself Dr Neill instead of Bishop Neill. But memory made the bishopric still important to his heart. He loved it that the Academy asked him to say grace at the annual dinner, for he was not the senior academician in orders, and therefore the invitation was a recognition that long ago he was consecrated in India to an apostolic work.

The list of lectureships he fulfilled includes most of the major names: Hulsean, Birkbeck, Duff, Moorhouse, Bampton, Westcott-Teape, and several others in Canada, Argentina, Malawi, South Africa, and the USA. He published two translations from the Italian theologian G. Mieggi, *Visible and Invisible* and *Gospel and Myth in the Thought of R. Bultmann*. He was a welcome visitor in numerous seminaries and academies across the world. Often in his travels he routed himself to take in pastoral concerns drawn from his chance contacts here or there. He sometimes did his transatlantic journeys via Iceland to encourage the Church there. His destinations, however, were always purposive. Strangely he never set foot in Jerusalem until the mid seventies of his life (and of the century) when he served as a trusty advisor to the Presiding Bishop of the Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East, Bishop H. B. Dehqani-Tafti, who had treasured his friendship as a student at Ridley Hall. Through this friendship he had become, at the time of his death, the valued Commissary of all four Middle East bishops in the Anglican Communion.

His publishing career from 1925 to 1984 produced some forty-five books, major and minor. The last was the first volume of an intended trilogy on the *History of Christianity in India*, which appeared a few weeks before his death. Its genesis he described as an intention of half a century. 'My missionary parents . . . carried me off to India in 1901. Since that time India has been at the very heart of my concerns and affections'. Writing of the thirties, he went on:

I set myself with ardour to the study of the subject (of Christianity in India). During the next forty years and more a number of chapters had been written and abandoned in the light of fuller knowledge. Only after retirement from full work in other areas have I been able to make Christianity in India a matter of central concern.

This labour occupied him intensely from 1979 when he took up residence (when not travelling) at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, as mentor to ordinands, and became an assistant bishop in the Oxford Diocese. Part of every academic year he was at his niche in the Library of Yale Divinity School. One last memory of him is of a sermon in the chapel of the Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, Virginia, at the early hour of 8 a.m. when Anglican spirituality was his theme. All was grist to his mill, from George Herbert and Thomas Traherne, via the Wesleys, Keble and the Tractarians, to late Victorian evangelicals.

A mind at once so versatile, an authorship so prolific, and a

career so ubiquitous, defeat any neat appraisal. To return where we began, was he ever really in doubt? Did India ever fully interrogate—as distinct from being a beloved venue for—his Christianity? Or was it that the upbringing and its imprint of finality permanently recruited his magnificent gifts for an evangelical assurance by which he always stood? ‘The word “faith”, he wrote in 1941, ‘is properly used only to describe a relationship between personalities.’ In that sense nothing was final except love to Christ and he quoted, with approval in the same context, the words of Pascal that religion had nothing to do with ‘certainty’ after any scientific manner. Yet Neill steadily allied his deep personal faith in God through Christ, as an intimate discipleship, with definitive norms about the Bible and the Church which, as we saw, a certain ‘common sense’ could and should retrieve from any existential suspicion that they might be mistaken. The tone of his critique (in an essay of 1977 in *The Truth of God Incarnate*, edited by Michael Green) of those who professed Christian faith but could not share his assurance about central Christian facts showed how strongly he rejected their standpoint.

He had a frank open face which welcomed friendship. He mingled *gravitas* with cheerfulness, but the latter was preponderant. Neither witty nor rumbustious, he was very pleasant company, for he was never solemn, had a jolly sort of humour, did not try to dominate the conversation, threw out strong opinions on contemporary subjects, and had a range of rare information. He valued friendship, and wrote a great many letters to keep his friendships in repair; in a sense he depended on them, for he never married. He was delightfully simple—proud, for example, to tell you that 170 people arrived to hear his lecture instead of the expected 50. He loved natural beauty especially hills and rare blossoms. He enjoyed music and liked to play classical records in the evenings. He liked a cigar, enjoyed a glass of wine, and knew a little about vintages, and had an unlooked-for knowledge of restaurants in capital cities where good meals could be got at reasonable prices. He was a strong royalist who hated dictators, and thought democracy far the most Christian form of constitution; a Conservative who thought Conservative governments fools. Some of his friendships carried with them a pastoral care, especially among students. About students he was always open, did not mind strange hair or ear-rings, and expected the best. He did not mind whether they were of any denomination or none, of any religion or none. On occasion he would find himself in tears when

greeted warmly by a group of students after a lecture or service. His two listed hobbies were 'mountaineering' and 'listening to the young'.

He died on 20 July 1984. The sequel of the *History of Christianity in India*, taking it from 1707 to 1858, was published by Cambridge University Press at the end of 1985. He also left an autobiography, and there is hope that this will be published. *The Times* obituarist said truly that he was 'one of the most striking and gifted figures from the Church world scene'.

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