

William Law – a forgotten resident of Putney

James Fraser writes of the close connection between the family of the writer Edward Gibbon and its spiritual advisor. To clarify reference to the three generations of the Gibbon family, Edward Gibbon, the historian (1737-94) is named simply as Gibbon; his grandfather, who employed William Law, is identified as Edward Gibbon I, while Edward Gibbon I's son, to whom Law was tutor, and who was the historian's father, is referred to as Edward Gibbon II.

Of all the well-known people who have been connected with the parish of Putney, either through proximity of birth or by association with our ancient parish church, probably none has exercised a greater spiritual influence than William Law. Yet paradoxically, none has been more forgotten in local memory, or more ignored in historical records, than this writer.

Law was a major figure by any reckoning. Dr Samuel Johnson commended his *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* as 'the finest piece of hortatory theology in any language', while John Wesley fully recognised the real quality of Law's abilities and writing. His gifts have continued to be recognised down to the present day, and the numerous quotations from Law in, for example, Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* are a measure of Huxley's interest in an author whom he in fact rated higher than the great Dr Johnson himself. In 1944 Huxley wrote:

I have been reading William Law with the greatest pleasure and profit. What a really wonderful writer, when he is at his best. It is sadly typical of our education that we are all made to read the second-rate amiabilities of Addison and Steele – but that one of the great masters of devotion and of philosophical theology is passed over almost in silence.

So much for the undoubted claim to fame of the Anglican clergyman whom the literary critic Caroline Spurgeon called 'our greatest prose mystic'.

Who then was William Law? He was born in 1686 in the Northamptonshire village of King's Cliffe. His father was a grocer, but ranked as a gentleman, so that William was brought up in a locally respected and genteel family. Little is known about his youth, but it seems likely that he was given a strict Christian upbringing, and that he and his brothers and sisters enjoyed a happy family life. It seems quite possible that the moving portrait of family affection and care in *A Serious Call* owes something to his experiences in childhood.

When he went up to Emmanuel College in Cambridge at the age of 18 or 19, the strictness of the Anglican principles on which he had no doubt been brought up were reflected in the list of rules that he drew up for himself in eighteen paragraphs. Typical are the fourth: 'To avoid all concerns with the world, or ways of it, but where religion and charity oblige me to act'; and the seventh: 'To remember, often and seriously how much time is inevitably thrown away from which I can expect nothing but the charge of guilt, and how little there may be to come, on which an eternity depends'. His temperamental bent towards strictness and rigour was further displayed when George I came to the throne in 1714, a year or two after Law was

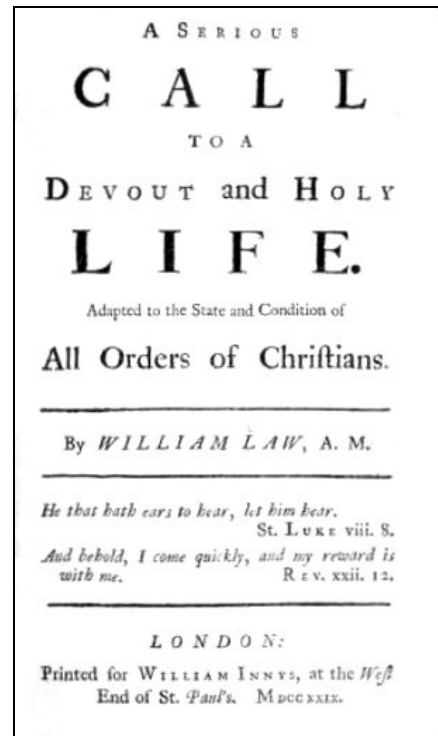
ordained deacon in 1711. Law, with many other bishops and priests, declined to take the Oath of Allegiance. As a Nonjuror, as such objectors were called, he had to resign his position at Emmanuel College – he had become a Fellow in 1711 – and he proceeded to engage in a career of controversial and polemical writing on behalf of the Anglian sect to which he had given his allegiance.

In 1723 William Law became the tutor of Edward Gibbon II, father of the historian. It is usually said that Law resided in the Gibbon household from 1727-37, but this must be taken to refer to permanent residence, since recent research has shown that ‘later in the same year [1723] the household acquired a new member ... William Law’ who became the tutor of the historian’s father, and ‘the much honoured friend and spiritual director of the entire family’.

Law’s official position in the household was chaplain, and private tutor to the historian’s father. It seems that the first Edward, the historian’s grandfather, had some sympathy with the Stuart cause, which would no doubt explain why Law obtained his position. The family seat, Gibbon recounts in his *Autobiography*, was a spacious house with gardens and lands at Putney in Surrey, where he resided in decent hospitality. Law was to live there until 1738-39, a little after his employer had died in 1737.

Edward Gibbon II was not a natural scholar. Law accompanied him to Emmanuel College, Cambridge in 1723, where he remained in residence for two years, returning home for a further two years, and returning to Cambridge for a further seven years, according to some authorities, until he finally left in 1734. He was both dull and wayward. Though agreeing under pressure to learn shorthand, for example, he so occupied himself with cards and other diversions that he failed to master the system. Perhaps he was encouraged to take it up in the first place because he wrote so badly and slowly. Family tradition identified this Edward with the character Flatus in Law’s *A Serious Call*, always with ‘some new project in his head’, but promised so much happiness by his ‘sanguine temper’ and strong passions that he is ‘satisfied with nothing’.

William Law cannot have enjoyed being tutor to so indolent a pupil. He himself was a serious and methodical student. In later years, we hear of him rising at five and spending much of the day in his small study, occupied at his reading and writing. He possessed a large theological library, particularly of mystical authors, including the Desert Fathers, but he was also familiar with medieval and more recent continental writings, including Thomas à



The title-page of the first edition of Law's *A Serious Call*.

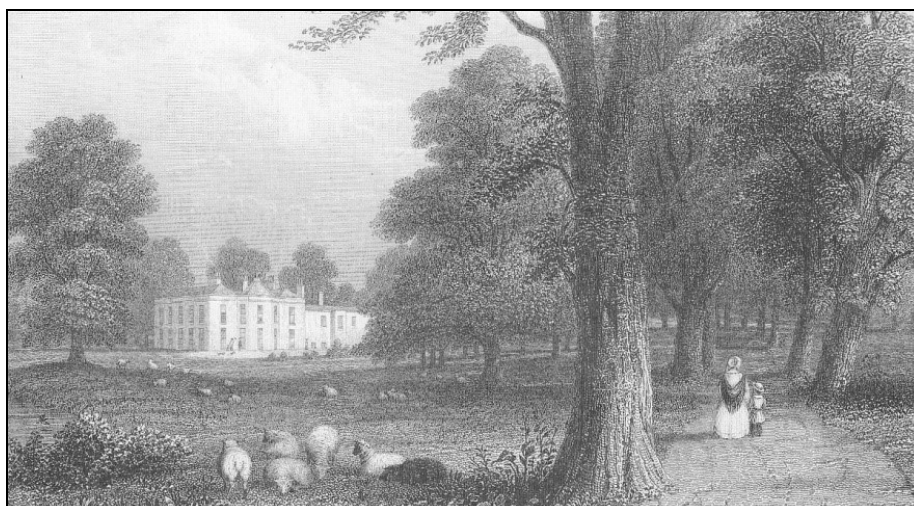
Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* and St Francis de Sales's *Introduction to the Devout Life*. 'His spiritual life', it has been well said 'was nourished by the books of his spiritual ancestors, and by what nourished them as well as him, a life centred in prayer and meditation'.

During his years in Putney, living virtually as a member of the Gibbon family, Law was no recluse. As chaplain to Edward Gibbon I, the practical business life of his patron must have impinged upon him. The keen knowledge of the human types which Law displays was based upon his years at the Gibbon estate at Putney – the family and their middle-class guests, businessmen and their wives; his visits to nearby London 'where he later lived for a few years'; on his memories of the university; and lastly on his knowledge of his own art. Through the family generally and Edward, his pupil, and Edward's sister Hester especially, he must have been drawn into a circle of domestic care and affection. He had a large circle of correspondents and entertained frequent visitors. His activities among the Nonjurors continued, though he declined to take any position of leadership or authority among them because of his continuing doubts as to the divisive nature of the movement in relation to the national church as a whole.

We do not know what Law looked like, since he refused to have his portrait painted. That was at least partly due to his philosophical attitude, which tended in the manner of some ancient philosophers to exalt mind over body. His temperament in his earlier years seems to have reflected an air of 'severity and gravity', as Wesley's sister noted, but in later life, according to the inhabitants of the village of King's Cliffe, he was 'in stature rather over than under the middle size; not corpulent, but stout made, with broad shoulders; his visage was round, his eyes grey; his features well proportioned, and not large; his complexion ruddy, and his countenance open and agreeable. He was naturally more inclined to be merry than sad'.

Despite his generally ascetic outlook Law could enjoy the good things of life, and his personal habits were less puritanical than his writings might suggest. When a friend visited him at Putney in 1729, they enjoyed the comforts of the house and shared a bottle of French wine. Eight years later the same friend noted that Law ate soup and beef, and drank two glasses of red wine, toasting Church and King, and 'all friends'. In later life he would smoke a pipe of tobacco before going to bed.

Edward Gibbon I died in 1737, and Law seems to have continued to live in Putney for another eighteen months or so. During his years of residence he seems increasingly to have been responsible for the welfare of Edward Gibbon II's sister Hester, the historian's aunt. In about 1740 Miss Hester Gibbon set up house with a Mrs Hutcheson, a rich and pious widow, in Law's native village, King's Cliffe. Shortly afterwards the celibate Law joined them as their spiritual director and chaplain. 'This small household, a kind of "protestant nunnery", resembled the family community of Nicholas Ferrar at Little Gidding, and continued that seventeenth-century experiment of "holy living" into the eighteenth century, forming a link between it and the revival of the monastic life after the Oxford Movement of the nineteenth century'. The three members of the household assembled three times a day for corporate prayers, and their time was devoted to good works. They kept only one tenth of their



Lime Grove, Putney Hill, where Law lived with the Gibbon family.

considerable income, and gave away the rest to the local poor. So ended Law's connection with Putney, where the house was eventually sold by Gibbon the historian in August 1769.

It is interesting to speculate as to how well known William Law was in the Putney locality in the years when he was chaplain at Lime Grove, the family house' near the bottom of Putney Hill. He had, of course, left Putney before Gibbon was old enough to remember him, but clearly his reputation and memory lived on. Gibbon himself was brought up by another sister of Edward Gibbon II, his Aunt Kitty, of whom Gibbon always spoke warmly. Most of the time, as far back as the historian could remember, he and his aunt were together in the house, not of his father but of his aunt, next to Putney Bridge and the churchyard – an old brick house surrounded by trees. 'It was there,' wrote Gibbon later, 'that I was allowed to spend the greatest part of my time, in sickness or in health during ... my parent's residence in London'. It seems inconceivable that Aunt Kitty did not, from time to time speak to the future historian of the eccentric, scholarly, devout man who had lived so long with the family. At all events, Gibbon's later testimony was generous: 'In our family he left the reputation of a worthy and pious man who believed all he professed and practised all that he enjoined.'

There is no means of knowing whether Law had any connection with Putney parish church; much less is it known whether he ever preached from its pulpit. His position of a Nonjuror may suggest that he did not, and certainly there is no record of his having spoken there. But in later years, with the two ladies under his direction, he attended all the services at the parish church of King's Cliffe, despite the fact that he and the resident rector were not on personally friendly terms. He lived and died an Anglican, and his reputation as one of the greatest of English spiritual writers, continues to the present day.

Note

At the time of writing this article James Fraser was the Vicar at St Mary's Church, Putney.

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