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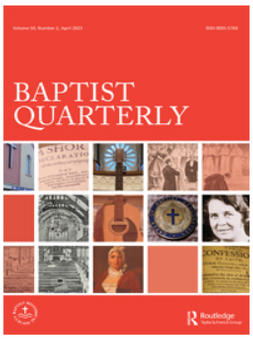

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Baptists in Sacred Space? Worship, Buildings, and Belonging

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ABSTRACT

An exploration, with particular reference to one Yorkshire chapel and families associated with it, of Baptists' need for buildings to fit their worship, fellowship, and polity. The first section introduces theme, builders, architects, benefactors, noting James Cubitt and Thomas Harwood Pattison, men sensitive to aesthetics. The second outlines the development of Wainsgate. The third is about 'belonging'. Family connections are explored, including the Mitchells and the Fawcetts who provide the focus for the fourth and fifth sections: John Fawcett, Wainsgate's first minister, and great-grandson William Mitchell Fawcett, barrister, friend of T.H. Pattison, contributing with him to *Religious Republics* (1869), considered in the final section. Fawcett's contribution, might be seen as an essay on belonging. What he analysed in 1869 remains relevant and explains Wainsgate, unique yet representative.

KEYWORDS

Building; belonging; polity; Wainsgate; Mitchell; Fawcett

I

My title embraces a spiritual totality; its question mark suggests a salutary doubt. I think here of that twentieth-century hero of Modernism, le Corbusier, whose confessional background was Reformed and for whom a house was a machine for living in. By that yardstick, Christians need buildings that are machines for worship and for fellowship. Baptists need that sort of space with specific provision for believer's baptism, although that provision need not be *architectural*: a pond or a stream might serve as well. Is that space 'sacred'? Surely not; for the church is neither the building nor its environs. Is all space 'sacred'? Surely yes, if one seeks to realise the *oikoumene,* the wholeness of creation.

Such questions exercised nineteenth-century Baptists. Their numerical and geographical growth necessitated machines for worship. Their growth in activity necessitated machines for fellowship. Their often agonised self-

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consciousness as *Baptists*, expressed *denominationally*, had further implications. Whether connexional or congregational, Baptists were not quite as the rest of society and yet as citizens in a society where the rights and responsibilities of citizenship were encompassing more and more men and women and where children were at last assuming a distinctive significance Baptists were integral. They were formative in that evolving society, prospering with it, responding to its cultural, aesthetic, and intellectual currents, immune to none of them.

To be fit for purpose, buildings need builders. To be really fit for purpose they need architects. Nineteenth-century builders became big business, nineteenth-century architects shaped themselves out of trade and into the professions, and Baptists were bound to be among them. Grissell and Peto, Peto and Betts, Higgs and Hill, and McAlpine come to the fore as builders. Searle, Baines, Robins, Wallis Chapman are names that stream through the architectural descriptions of successive *Baptist Handbooks*. They were men who interpreted and put into effect the needs of their clients. They were also thinking men, sometimes scholarly, responding to contemporary trends. Preeminent among them was James Cubitt. His understanding of Gothic architecture, interpreted for contemporary Baptist needs, was not flawless but it was creatively fit for purpose and he wrote about it in joined-up sentences.[1] Here I interject a coincidence that is in fact more than a coincidence for it allows me to develop my thesis.

Cubitt was a Goth but his earliest Baptist buildings were essays in Ruskinian Romanesque. One of these was for Elswick, a labourers' suburb in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Rye Hill Baptist Church (1864) was a young man's building: Cubitt was twenty-eight. It was completed just before another young man, the twenty-six-year-old Thomas Harwood Pattison, became Rye Hill's minister. It was Pattison's second pastorate and at Rye Hill he converted a cause that was mired in division into a flourishing artisans' congregation. I doubt whether Pattison and Cubitt met; it is conceivable that they knew of each other but that near coincidence is more than a coincidence because both men were keenly sensitive to the aesthetic implications of Baptist worship and Pattison's name will recur, significantly if glancingly, in what follows.[2]

There is another dimension to Baptist builders, not easily married to Baptist churchmanship but inseparable from nineteenth-century realities: men (and their families) whose money built Baptist churches – Coats of Paisley, Muntz

[1]For James Cubitt (1836–1912) see a precursor to this paper: Clyde Binfield, "Towards an Appreciation of Baptist Architecture," in *Baptists in the Twentieth Century*, ed. K.W. Clements (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1983), 114–42, esp. 122–6. See also Clyde Binfield, *The Contexting of a Chapel Architect. James Cubitt 1836–1912* (London: The Chapels Society, Occasional Publications 2, 2001).

[2]For his people at Middleton-in-Teasdale, his first pastorate, Pattison had published a *Service of Song* with 113 hymns, scripture passages, the *Te Deum*, and notes on the sacraments: F.G. Little and E.T.F. Walker, *The Story of the Northern Baptists* (Newcastle, 1945, 41). I am indebted to Mrs Susan Mills and Mrs Faith Bowers for information about Thomas Harwood Pattison (1838–1904), for whom see *The Examiner*, Vol. 82, No. 11, 17 March 1904, 328–9; *Baptist Magazine*, 1904, 160–1; also Binfield, *James Cubitt*, 24–6, and 'Towards an Appreciation', 120–1.

and Middlemore of Birmingham, and, if a little later and further away, Rockefeller of New York. Those names ought to be enough to explain the stylistic variety, indeed the exuberance, of Baptist buildings. Coats Memorial Baptist Church, Paisley, is in the top tier of nineteenth-century British church buildings; Omberslade Baptist Church, for the Muntz family, is a quintessential squire's church, tree-embowered in parkland; neither is more nor less Baptist than the Metropolitan Tabernacle or Bloomsbury or that 'fashionable watering place', St Mary's, Norwich; all of them are sufficient to prompt thoughts of 'sacred space', alongside those Baptists-in-the-pew who instinctively call their 'sacred' space the 'sanctuary'.[3]

II

It is time to move from the general to the particular in order to focus on one *sacred* yet *Baptist* space, which combines belonging, building, and worship.

Wainsgate, Hebden Bridge, in Yorkshire, is a historic cause. It has ceased to be what Communists used to call a 'working church' because it is in the care of the Historic Chapels Trust but its ancillary buildings house a plethora of activities suitable to an outpost of that West Riding Latin Quarter which is Hebden Bridge. Before savouring the 'wow factor' which enthused the Historic Chapels Trust, we need to know its history.[4]

Wainsgate was a seedbed for Baptist church planting. Its origins reach to the 1680s and the work of two Baptist cousins, William Mitchel and David Crosley of Heptonstall, which issued in churches formed in Rossendale (1696) and Barnoldswick (1711). That work was reinvigorated in the mid-eighteenth century by the impact of William Grimshaw, perpetual curate of Haworth from 1742. He converted Richard Smith who became a member of Barnoldswick Baptist church, then a preacher, and then the first minister of a new cause, Wainsgate, where a chapel was built in 1750. Wainsgate was in the vast parish of Halifax and Smith's preaching led to the Baptist church in Halifax itself (1755). Another Grimshaw convert, James Hartley, who was also a Wainsgater, became first minister at Haworth and a Wainsgate member and deacon who had moved to Bradford to be that church's first minister (1753) baptised John Fawcett, a young Bradfordian who was also befriended by James Hartley. The picture is one of individual friendships interweaving with a collective passion for ministry, baptism, and church formation. Fawcett and his descendants figure in what follows but at this point precedence must be given to the building at Wainsgate.

[3]For the Coats family and their building largesse see Clyde Binfield, "The Coats Family and Paisley Baptists I," *Baptist Quarterly* XXXVI, no. I (January 1995): 29–42; and "The Coats Family and Paisley Baptists II," *Baptist Quarterly* XXXVI, no. 2 (April 1995): 80–95. See also "Towards an Appreciation," 126–7.

[4]This account is drawn from Charles W. Thomson, *Wainsgate Baptist Chapel, West Yorkshire: A History and Guide* (London: Historic Chapels Trust, 2012); *The Baptists of Yorkshire. Being the Centenary Memorial Volume of the Yorkshire Baptist Association* (Bradford: Wm Byles & Sons Ltd; London: Kingsgate Press, 1912).

Figure 1. Wainsgate Chapel, above Hebden Bridge.

Declared unsafe, it was rebuilt in 1815, to seat 300. It was rebuilt again in 1860, to seat 700. In the 1890s and into the turn of the next century it was generously refurbished. It was that refurbishment which gives the building its particular quality Figure 1.

Externally the chapel is uncompromisingly wuthering, grey as the prevailing weather. It stands, in the words of its latest history, 'in a proud position, built into a steeply sloping moorside in Old Town above Hebden Bridge', an ambitious structure for 'thinly populated moorlands', with ample ancillary accommodation.[5] It has 'chapel' written all over it, *northern* chapel; Baptist might be added for good measure. It is not as urban as it looks and a park-like graveyard softens the wutheringness of the setting. Here was the focal point for a community linked by footpaths, tracks, and bridleways, and – to judge from the tombs in the graveyard – encompassing all the gradations that might be expected in a community Figure 2.

The interior bears this out. The lobby has an immediate surprise: a cupboard for hymnbooks, bibles, leaflets, Baptist detritus in general, which incorporates a plan of pew sittings and a mechanism for showing how many were taken: the anxious enquirer could be placed in a trice. There is another surprise: the glass, or crystal, handle of the door to the 'sanctuary'. It is an oddly joyful touch, a foretaste of what is to come Figure 3.

There is much to note about this chapel's interior. For a start, there is the rail which protects the platform on which stands the table and beneath which is the baptismal tank. It is not, strictly speaking, a communion rail – its prime purpose is health and safety – but it has all the dignity of a communion rail. It is a careful

[5]Thomson, *Wainsgate*, 3.

Figure 2. Wainsgate's graveyard: here lies John Fawcett.

piece of work. The name of its designer is known (R.T. Redman of Crimsworth); so is the name of the man who carved it (J.W. Mitchell of Halifax). Mitchell is a name that will recur but perhaps this Mitchell's name is a coincidence. The rail is 'supported on double open "barley-twist" balusters. On the top the carving

Figure 3. The lobby cupboard, with its plan of pew sittings.

represents the oak leaf and the acorn; that on the principal posts represents the vine with bunches of fruit and flowers, while the base has a garland of primroses'.[6] There is nothing chance about such decoration, however exuberant it might be Figure 4.

No less notable than the rail is the pulpit. This too was designed and positioned in 1891. Its designer was Anthony Welsh of Leeds. Lavish is the only word for it:

> largely of alabaster, with bas-relief carvings in white marble … classical in style, and octagonal in form, supported by columns in richly carved Genoa green marble with carved Corinthian capitals in white alabaster, and with a banding of rich Numidian red marble. The plinth is in Italian purple porphyry. The handrail and other mouldings are of Numidian red marble and the steps in rouge red marble. Round the body of the pulpit is a series of pilasters in rich Mexican onyx with carved capitals. Facing the congregation are three relief panels in pure white Carara statuary, representing 'The Baptism of Christ', 'The Agony in the Garden', and 'The Blessing of the Bread and Wine' Figure 5.[7]

There was nothing chance about the three relief panels; their subjects are central to the faith, order, and worship of this Church. The fact that the pulpit was a gift must also be noted. Its base is inscribed: ' … presented by Miss Cousin and Mrs Mitchell of Boston Hill and her family'. Another gift might be noted here: a mosaic floor of Alpha-Omega pattern given by John Cousin Mitchell in 1919, 'supposedly designed' by the daughter of Dr L.H. Marshall of Liverpool, later of McMaster University, Toronto, and later still of Rawdon College. So gender has its role here as well as family association, and here are Baptists. Young Miss Marshall alerts us to a wider Baptist world; her father, who was regarded with suspicion in conservative circles, was a man of note in his day Figure 6.[8]

Of course, there is more. Like the pulpit and the rail Wainsgate's Wordsworth organ was installed in 1891. It testifies to this Baptist community's ambitious musical tradition, indeed to an ambition which the building can barely contain. The pulpit, though lavish, was not designed for a Spurgeon, unless for an etiolated Spurgeon. Provision for the choir was prominent but cramped, albeit carefully warmed by radiators; there was no room here for the Baptist equivalent of Dame Clara Butt. Even so, here is manifestly a home for cantatas, services of song, oratorios too. It prompts a question: who was chief in this vessel of a chapel? Was it the captain or the pilot, the organist/choirmaster or the preacher? Each commanded a chapel in which there was more to

[6]Thomson, *Wainsgate*, 19–20.
[7]Thomson, *Wainsgate*, 20.
[8]Thomson, *Wainsgate*, 20. This is tantalising. In 1919 Miss Marshall was a young girl; hence, perhaps, the 'supposedly'. In November 1919 her father was called to the ministry of Queen's Road, Coventry, moving there in 1920. For Laurance Henry Marshall (1882–1953) see *BHB*, 1954, 331–2; Clyde Binfield, *Pastors and People: The Biography of a Baptist Church, Queen's Road Coventry* (Coventry: Queen's Road Baptist Church, 1984), 182–200.

Figure 4. The pulpit, designed in 1891 by Anthony Welsh of Leeds, lavish in alabaster and marble, the gift of Miss Cousin and Mrs Mitchell.

be commanded than the casual visitor might think. When rebuilt in mid-century Wainsgate seated 700 and beneath the refurbishing of the 1890s the standard plan for such a building remains undisturbed. Just as every chapel should be

Figure 5. The pulpit's central panel, 'pure white Carrara statuary', shows the Baptism of Christ.

Figure 6. The organist's domain: a home for cantatas, services of song, and slimmed down oratorios – and carefully warmed.

savoured from the pulpit (and in this instance from the organist/choirmaster's podium as well), so every galleried chapel should be savoured from its gallery, even if only at times of anniversary. There is such music in the rhythm of a gallery's pews Figure 7.

At this point we return to the multifarious and omnipresent Mitchells by way of John Bamber who ministered at Wainsgate for twenty-three years. He died at Garstang in Lancashire but justice was done to him at Wainsgate in the memorial erected to his memory rather later by the family of the late Mrs Mitchell. It is pleasingly, ambitiously baroque, at once elegant and florid as baroque allows one to be. It serves to introduce a last but most insistent note: a sequence of windows rich in stained glass by Powell of Leeds, portraying Mary Magdalene, the Way of the Cross, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection, the gift of Mitchells in memory of Mitchells. Here are commemorated Henry Mitchell, who died in April 1859, his widow and her sister, who died within a day of each other in February 1900, together with another sister. They were installed in 1904 by the male Mitchells of the next generation. The Way of the Cross was placed by her sons in

Figure 7. The chapel as viewed from the organist/choirmaster's podium: there is much music in the rhythm of a gallery's pews.

memory of Mrs Henry Mitchell, the Crucifixion was in memory of her husband, and the Resurrection commemorates his sister-in-law and was given by his sons and her nephews. They glow in memory, colour, and symbol, and they are steeped in a scriptural faith. There is more to this quintessentially northern Baptist chapel than its exterior might possibly suggest, all of it – despite appearances – Baptist Figures 8–11.

III

This worshipful building speaks of belonging, which is perhaps a better and more accurate word than 'polity'. The Mitchells were a family who belonged. From the building of the present chapel in 1860, and for the next forty years, the running was made by a mother and two aunts-in-Israel: the widowed Sarah Ann Mitchell, her sister-in-law who was also, confusingly, Sarah Mitchell, and her sister, Mary Elizabeth Cousin. It was through their generosity and in their memory that the chapel was refurbished between 1891 and 1904 and they provided the manse, 'Cousinville'.[9]

The Mitchells were mill owners, cotton manufacturers. They had built Old Town Mill in 1851. It survives, with its tall black chimney intact, in other hands; in 2013 it was making circus gear.[10] Their house, Boston Hill, at the

[9]Thomson, *Wainsgate*, 12.
[10]Paul Barker, 'Personal Column', *HCT Newsletter*, Issue 37, Spring 2013.

Figure 8. The memorial to John Bamber, minister for twenty-three years, at once elegant and florid, as the baroque allows you to be.

start of Old Town Mill Lane, has not survived; a housing development has replaced it. Henry Mitchell, who built up the business, died on the eve of his chapel's rebuilding but the continuity was driven by his sister, his widow, and her sister, and maintained by his sons. It closed with the death in Huddersfield of a granddaughter, Constance, in 1948.

Wainsgate's *History and Guide* quotes three entries from church minute books that indicate the nature of this belonging. It was one in which fellowship trumped proprietorship but in which the proprieties were nonetheless observed:

> *29 April 1858*: 'that Miss Cousin have the use of the School Rooms for her tea parties'.
>
> *21 April 1888*: 'that Miss Mitchell be allowed use of the Chapel for the celebration of her Jubilee'.
>
> *27 August 1919*: 'thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell for using their grounds at Boston Hill for a garden party'.[11]

[11]Thomson, *Wainsgate*, 13.

Figure 9. Mary Magdalene washes the feet of Jesus: one of a sequence of windows by Powell of Leeds, installed in 1904 in memory of the Mitchell family.

There was a rare connectivity about the Mitchells and the Cousins. Their marriages drew together Baptists, the textile industry, and Hebden Bridge. To these two families must be added the Horsfalls and the Fawcetts and, through the Fawcetts, the Wrights and the Greenwoods.[12] All had been entrenched in and near Hebden Bridge for generations. Their names testified to their sense of family and their respect for ancestry. The tombs of many of them dignify Wainsgate's graveyard. One and another of them achieved civic prominence. John Skirrow Wright (1822–1880), born in Hebden Bridge, made buttons in Birmingham, was treasurer of Birmingham's Baptist Association and first chairman of its Liberal Association; he became M.P. for Nottingham and then, within days of his election, his parliamentary career was thwarted by death.[13] From the next generation John Cousin Horsfall (1846–1920), also born in Hebden Bridge, spun worsted in Glusburn, Sutton-in-Craven, or,

[12]I am indebted to Mrs Diana Monahan for much information about these families and their connections.
[13]For John Skirrow Wright (1822–1880) see Michael Stenton, *Who's Who of British Members of Parliament Volume I 1832–1885,* (Hassocks: The Harvester Press, 1976), 419.

Figure 10. A window detail, rich in colour and symbol and steeped in a scriptural faith.

Figure 11. There is more to this quintessentially northern Baptist chapel than its exterior might possibly express.

rather, 600 hands spun worsted for him. He became president of Yorkshire's Baptist Association, treasurer of its Chapel Loan Fund, and builder and benefactor of the Glusburn Institute, a Free Renaissance complex designed to serve

Baptist and civic needs in equal measure. He failed to enter Parliament but he became a power in the West Riding County Council and was rewarded with a baronetcy in the hey-day of Asquithian Liberalism.[14]

It was not unusual for Nonconformist cousinhoods to have such stars in their firmaments, but in this Baptist cousinhood one name constantly recurs: Fawcett. John Cousin Horsfall's second wife was a Fawcett; John Skirrow Wright's father was Edward Fawcett Wright and *his* grandparents had been John Fawcett and Susannah Skirrow through whom we enter another dimension of Baptist belonging in which, almost needless to say, Wainsgate has its place.

IV

One word encapsulates this dimension: *mindset*. That encompasses mentality, tradition, heredity, three pre-dispositions which here have a bearing on conversion.

Mindset, however, fails to encompass John Fawcett (1739/40–1817), the Baptist patriarch of Hebden Bridge, Wainsgate included.[15] In the days when Baptist student societies took the names of past divines – at Cambridge it was Robert Hall – the Sheffield society was named after John Fawcett. That might seem surprising. Fawcett's impact on Yorkshire's Baptists was undoubted but it was less so in Sheffield and south Yorkshire. It was with Hebden Bridge that Fawcett was indelibly associated, at Wainsgate that he began his stated ministry, and in Wainsgate's graveyard that he was buried.

It is tempting to call John Fawcett a Renaissance man but that would be both flippant and constraining. A Renaissance man has a hinterland on which to build; Fawcett had none but he developed the attributes of such a man. He had a wide culture and a consistent determination to add to the sum of his knowledge. He was a man for whom improvement was important.

There was a generosity about him. He was an auto-didact but without the sharp edge that marks many auto-didacts. He was intellectually generous, a natural communicator eager to teach children and young people and to train young men for ministry. He was spiritually generous, fusing his early experiences of evangelical Anglicanism and Methodism into his Particular Baptist prime. This informed his good relations with the General Baptists who also flourished in Hebden Bridge. In 1912 W.E. Blomfield, surveying Baptist progress in Yorkshire and more generally, attributed much to Fawcett: from his church at Wainsgate came John Foster, the essayist, and Sutcliffe of Olney, one of the

[14]For Sir John Cousin Horsfall Bt (1846–1920) see *Who Was Who, 1916–1928* (London: A&C Black, 1929), 518; *The Baptists of Yorkshire*, 183–4; W. H. Smith and W. T. Pike, eds, *The West Riding of Yorkshire at the Opening of the Twentieth Century: Contemporary Biographies* (Brighton, 1902), 301.

[15]For John Fawcett (1739/40–1817) see *ODNB*; *The Baptists of Yorkshire,* 98–102, 219, 273–281; J.H.Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1994), 14-18; E.F. Clipsham, "John Fawcett," in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography, 1730–1860*, ed. Donald M. Lewis, Vol. 1, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 381; Thomson, *Wainsgate*, 5–9.

Baptist Missionary Society's founders; from his academy at Brearley Hall came William Ward, colleague of Marshman and Carey; to him Yorkshire owed its Baptist Association and in his church at Hebden Bridge the Northern Baptist Education Society was founded.[16] He was a man of wide horizons who facilitated their enlargement for others. He was also a man for whom belonging was important.

Fawcett was at Wainsgate for thirteen years (1764–1777). It was his first pastorate and he was its second pastor. He then moved with most of his people downhill to Hebden Bridge, where he remained for forty years – the rest of his life. He twice refused pressing and attractive calls to leave Yorkshire. In 1772 he declined a call to Carter Lane in London and in 1792 he turned down the principalship of Bristol's Baptist Academy. It is said that the former occasioned his hymn, 'Blest be the tie that binds'. He was all set to leave Wainsgate for Carter Lane, the waggons were packed, but he found it impossible to leave.[17] His expression of this in a hymn is natural as well as striking. Hymns exemplify belonging. They are a communal act incorporating individual belief. 'Blest be the tie that binds' and 'Lord, dismiss us with Thy blessing' were included in Fawcett's *Hymns Adapted to the Circumstances of Public Worship and Private Devotion* (1782), and among his many other publications Fawcett's *The Constitution and Order of a Gospel Church* (1797) presses the point home. Here is a Baptist statement of belonging. For Baptists a Church is a spiritual creation resulting from the work of grace in the lives of its members; it expresses the societal and the individual, the divine imperative and the vital response of evangelical experience; and such belonging is a prerequisite of revival and renewal.[18]

Although he had long moved away from Wainsgate, Fawcett was conscious of what bound him to the place. He had built a home for his retirement which he called Machpelah, since that was the name Abraham gave to the place where he buried Sarah, and that is where in 1810 Fawcett buried Susannah after fifty-two years of marriage.[19] In September 1815 Fawcett preached at the opening of the rebuilt Wainsgate Chapel. He died in July 1817 and was buried in the chapel's graveyard; Susannah was re-interred to lie beside him. In 1904, as part of the long Mitchell refurbishing, a memorial to Fawcett was placed in Wainsgate's upper gallery, next to the Wordsworth organ. It has been described as 'a dignified proto-modernist, classicising design with gilt-inscribed lettering on a plaque of shelly pink marble'. Over the top, perhaps, yet appropriately placed in affectionate as well as elegant memory of the man who wrote 'Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love'.

[16]W.E. Blomfield, 'The Baptist Churches of Yorkshire in the 17th and 18th Centuries', *The Baptists of Yorkshire*, 98.
[17]Thomson, *Wainsgate*, 6.
[18]As summarised in J.H.Y. Briggs, *English Baptists*, 14–18.
[19]*Genesis* xxiii, 8–17.

V

John Fawcett had a great-grandson, William Mitchell Fawcett (b. 1839). Although his was a London-based professional career, this Fawcett's names suggest a continuity, his places of residence suggest the combination of that continuity with belonging, and a publication of his indicates an awareness of this legacy.

William Mitchell Fawcett was a barrister, Lincoln's Inn, author of *A Compendium of the law of landlord and tenant*, 1871, 3rd edition 1905. This suggests a decent professional status which is borne out by successive addresses: in 1881, at Cassiobury, near Watford, with his wife, sister, two children, and three servants; by 1891 at Hampstead Hill Gardens and still there in 1901, still with his wife, sister, and three servants. His wife, from Hull, was five years older than he; his sister – 'Living on her own means' – was two years younger. Their cook had been with them at least since 1871. This was a stable household but the death later in 1881 of the elder child, the fourteen-year-old Bracewell Fawcett, and the fact that in 1901 the surviving child, Cicely, was still at home and unmarried at the age of thirty-one hints at ill-health. Theirs was not a large family.[20]

It was, however, a well-circumstanced family. W.M. Fawcett's father, also William, was a Baptist minister of independent means. He was at Sutton-in-Craven between 1837 and 1846, and in Westmoreland thereafter, at Crosby Garrett from 1856.[21] He was not in pastoral charge after 1846 but he was in steady demand as a preacher and sustainer of local Baptist causes, financially cushioned by his second marriage to the daughter of George Greenwood, a Hull ship owner with property in Westmoreland.[22] William Fawcett's home, Mossgill House, Crosby Garrett, was part of that property. In due course, William Fawcett's son, William Mitchell Fawcett, by then a young married barrister, lived at The Hill, Crosby Garrett, which is where his two children were born.[23]

It might be felt that these were embedded country Baptists: Crosby Garrett, Sutton-in-Craven, with Hebden Bridge and Wainsgate too, for William Fawcett, Baptist minister, was the son of John Fawcett, Baptist schoolmaster, and the grandson of John Fawcett, Baptist minister and church planter, both of Hebden Bridge.[24] Theirs was a fond continuity sustained and renewed by friendship. In 1862 the Baptist chapel at Great Asby, Westmoreland, was rebuilt for £200. Great Asby was one of the causes helped by William Fawcett. The

[20]Was Bracewell Fawcett's health the reason why they were at Cassiobury, a rural retreat, in March 1881? This information is drawn from Census Returns, 1881, 1891, 1901, and from Mrs Diana Monahan.
[21]For William Fawcett (1799–1874) see C.E. Shipley, "The Churches of the Craven District," *The Baptists of Yorkshire*, 183; Alan P.F. Sell, *Church Planting: A Study of Westmorland Nonconformity* (Worthing: H.E. Walter Ltd, 1986), 93–6.
[22]Sell, *Church Planting*, 96; the Greenwoods of Oxenhope, an extensive clan of Baptists and Congregationalists, are explored in Kenneth Emsley, "The Haworth Chapelry: A Pennine Moorland Textile Community (1841–1881)," (unpublished M.Phil. dissertation, Division of Continuing Education, University of Sheffield, 2001).
[23]Census Returns, 1871.
[24]Thomson, *Wainsgate*, 7–8; information from Mrs Diana Monahan.

preacher at its re-opening was a very young man, Thomas Harwood Pattison, lately of Regent's Park College, newly settled at Middleton-in-Teasdale, shortly to move to Rye Hill, Newcastle, and a friend and associate of William Fawcett's son, William Mitchell Fawcett.[25] That friendship issued in a volume of essays.

VI

In 1869 Longmans, Green, and Co published *Religious Republics: Six Essays on Congregationalism*.[26] My copy got as far as Gloucestershire because it bears the bookplate of B.W. Cooke, Brook House, Painswick. I do not know how widely it was read. In July 1998 Susan Mills told me that the pages of the copy at Regent's Park College were uncut, apart from those of the first essay, which had received pencilled annotations.[27]

The boldness of the enterprise commands admiration. Even for an age when essays and sermons were a publisher's staple fare, the title and subject of this volume seem uncompromising: *Republics*? *Congregationalism*? Shades of Cromwell and his Commonwealth. Its preface is brief and to the point:

> The aim of this volume is two fold: first, to describe the religious system of Congregationalists, whether Baptist or Independent, and the forms of character and opinion which it has contributed to produce; and, secondly, to explain the basis of reason on which Congregational Nonconformity rests.[28]

There is also an epigraph, a quotation from Baron Bunsen. That, too, is to the point:

> My general impression is, that in the minds of the men of highest intellect a preparation is going forward for a new epoch; … a period of serious and yet free research after the reality of Christianity among the Catholics, and of advancement in the same direction among the learned Protestants, with a quick growth and spread of congregational life.[29]

The essays were of unequal length. The shortest was thirty pages, the longest was seventy-six. Their titles were brisk but comprehensive: 'Congregational Polity', 'The External Relations of Congregationalism', 'The Congregationalist Character', 'Congregationalism and Aesthetics' 'Congregationalism and Science', and 'The Spirit of Nonconformity'. The first and the last were the longest.

The authors were young men, friends in their twenties and early thirties, several of them with London University in common. Four were Congregationalists and two were Baptists. Three were lawyers, two were ministers, one was a

[25]Sell, *Church Planting*, 98.
[26]*Religious Republics: Six Essays on Congregationalism* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1869).
[27]Mrs Susan J. Mills to J.C.G.B., 8 July, 1998.
[28]'Preface', *Religious Republics*.
[29]Epigraph, facing title page, *Religious Republics*.

medical man. All were from well-established Dissenting families. The Baptist contributors were Thomas Harwood Pattison, thirty-one years old, minister at Rye Hill Baptist Church, Newcastle-on-Tyne, and William Mitchell Fawcett, barrister-at-law. Pattison's subject was aesthetics, a Baptist's affronted riposte to Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1867), relevant here but I have considered it elsewhere.[30] Fawcett's essay was on polity. It informs my focus on Wainsgate and it projects forward the impact of his great-grandfather, John Fawcett, for he too had written on polity; and for polity read 'belonging'.

This latest Fawcett wrote with a lawyer's careful clarity: readable, at times punchy, informative, engaged.[31] His sources included Joseph Angus's 'Christian Churches',[32] and his friend Pattison had been one of Angus's students at Regent's Park. They also included a judicious mix of *Baptist Handbooks* and *Congregational Year Books*. References to the former are more numerous than to the latter, so perhaps he remained a Baptist. His most recent reference, however, was to Hare Court, Canonbury, a historic Congregational church replanted with rapid success in north London. Was that where Fawcett worshipped while preparing his essay or was it simply because Hare Court's minister, Alexander Raleigh, had been Chairman of the Congregational Union in 1868 and was therefore a man of immediate note?[33]

Fawcett began by presenting two ideas of the Church. The first seemed 'necessarily to involve a hierarchy' since it offered the Church as 'a means of mediation between God and man; … endowed with the power of remitting sins, and intrusted with the revelation of the Divine will'. The second displayed the Church as 'a congregation of believing men [*sic*], associated for purposes of mutual edification, and the observance of Divine ordinances'. It found 'natural expression in a democratic polity' and its embodiment was Congregationalism.[34] It was this idea which he proposed to examine.

A Congregational Church was

> an association of persons of spiritual character, united by voluntary consent for the accomplishment of spiritual objects … [Its] leading consideration … is not what is expedient but what saith the Scripture? … [T]he New Testament contains all the principles of order and discipline requisite for constituting and governing Christian Societies …

[30]Thomas Harwood Pattison, "Congregationalism and Aesthetics," Religious Republics 133–168. Clyde Binfield, *Baptists in the Twentieth Century*, 121; Clyde Binfield, "Nonconformist Architecture: A Congregational Focus, Part I," *Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society* 10, no. 6 (May 2020): 320–24; Clyde Binfield, "Meeting-House, Chapel and Church: Context, Theory, and Practice in Protestant Nonconformity's Places of Worship, c.1829-c.1929," in *Places of Worship in Britain and Ireland 1829-1929*, eds. P.S. Barnwell and Mark Smith, Rewley House Studies in the Historic Environment 13 (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2022), 127–172, esp. 135–137.

[31]William Mitchell Fawcett, "The Congregational Polity," *Religious Republics* 1–59.

[32]Perhaps more likely to be Angus's *Christian Churches: The Noblest Form of Social Life; The Representatives of Christ on Earth; The Dwelling Place of the Holy Spirit* (London: Jackson, Walford, and Hodder, 1862) than his *Christian Churches: Their Success Proportionate to the Presence and Grace of the Holy Spirit* (London: Elliot Stock, 1865).

[33]"Congregational Polity," 35; for Alexander Raleigh (1817–1880) see *ODNB*. It may be pertinent that Fawcett's fellow barrister and Religious Republican, James Anstie, who contributed 'The Spirit of Nonconformity', admired and sat under Raleigh.

[34]"Congregational Polity," 1.

and in cases of uncertainty the Congregationalist would be 'careful to base his procedure upon some general principle derived from inspired authority'. That said, Congregationalists always had recourse to 'the principle of expediency'. Fawcett's Congregationalism was thus a model of sanctified common sense.[35]

The *tone* of this Fawcett's take on Congregational polity merits examination. Thus, the fact that 'each church is complete within itself' does not mean that such independence must lead to isolation for among such churches there is no lack of 'spontaneous fellowship and co-operation' as well as remarkable uniformity of practice and belief. That, perhaps, was because the Congregationalist, 'rejecting all formal creeds, is free from the natural reaction which follows the imposition of these restraints'.[36]

Fawcett warmed to such apparent contradiction. He ruminated on the views and position of the pastor. His views.

> … must generally accord with those prevalent in the church, because men will not choose as teachers those who, in their opinion, will promulgate error. But the pastor, as the recognised exponent of doctrine, has incessant opportunities … of influencing the beliefs of members … and the limits of toleration allowed him on points of doctrine, if in other respects he be acceptable, are very wide.[37]

He noted wryly that, 'It has been well said that while Churchmen subscribe creeds without believing them, Congregationalists believe them without subscribing'.[38]

Pastors needed to be paid. That brought church funds into his purview. Fawcett balanced the arguments for and against pew rents and free will weekly offerings. The former were certainly open to criticism ('The idea of parcelling out the House of God into a number of small leaseholds is not a pleasant one', and might lead in extreme cases to regarding the chapel as a 'private affair')[39] but in reality the system's dangers were neutralised by other factors. Rented pews allowed for the provision of free pews for visitors or the indigent. Moreover,

> the system of pew rents is … an effective mode of securing a steady income; it is not burdensome to the seat-holders, it promotes regularity of attendance, fosters a home-like feeling of attachment to the chapel, and enables the minister to see at a glance whether any of his accustomed hearers are absent from public worship.[40]

The pew plan in Wainsgate's lobby and its mechanism for allocating sittings come to mind.

By contrast the free-will offertory system was 'apt to afford the parsimonious a covert means of shirking their proper share of the expenses of the chapel'.[41]

[35]"Congregational Polity," 1–3, 5.
[36]"Congregational Polity," 6, 12.
[37]"Congregational Polity," 16–17.
[38]"Congregational Polity," 17.
[39]"Congregational Polity," 18.
[40]"Congregational Polity," 19.
[41]Ibid.

Fawcett relished the role of godly devil's advocate. Did power always lie where money lay? That was plausible but untrue. Did the Congregational system foster an unduly competitive spirit among chapels? That too was plausible but untrue. Did it facilitate division and secession within chapels, leading to a plethora of small causes? That was a real but over-stated danger: the *Baptist Handbook* for 1868 had noted that 761 of the 2382 Baptist Churches in Great Britain and Ireland had fewer than fifty members and only forty-one of these had fewer than ten; two-thirds might be regarded as viable concerns.[42]

He turned to the vesting in church members of the ultimate authority in all church affairs and what that meant for the election of pastor and deacons and the admission of their fellow members. Thus, if deacons tended, perhaps unduly, to be men of some social position that was because such men had the leisure as well as the experience and expertise to assume the responsibilities of office – and not all deacons were socially elevated.[43] If the election of pastors were open to criticism, most settlements in fact issued from unopposed calls. Fawcett was clear-eyed about the disadvantages of this way of doing things:

> In point of strict law, nothing can be more insecure than the position of the Congregationalist minister. He is at most only tenant at will to the trustees, and his interest in the chapel, and the dwelling-house sometimes attached to it, may be determined by a mere demand of possession, without any previous notice to quit.[44]

He recognised that this state of affairs contributed to the relative brevity of Congregational pastorates but again he took care to put this into perspective. In 1867 just over half of English Baptist pastors had been in post for over five years and just under a third for over ten years. Given that 'Pastors, like other men, are sometimes idle or imprudent, or quarrelsome or incompetent, … in all these cases the power of dismissing them is an unquestionable benefit'.[45]

Fawcett patiently balanced the advantages and disadvantages of the Congregational system. It might well be 'that the tendency of popular election is to lower the standard of attainments required from the pastor', that the 'majority of the electors being persons of little education, are supposed to have no great appreciation of the benefits of learning', and that the tendency was 'to lay more stress on preaching than on any other of the pastoral functions', but it was also true that 'preaching talent is by no means inconsistent with the possession of knowledge. Fortunately … education develops oratorical gifts, and supplies a solid basis for their display'.[46] He cast a sympathetic eye on the colleges which trained Baptist and Congregational ministers and the relative length of their courses, noting that nine of the ten colleges listed in the *Baptist*

[42]"ongregational polity," 20, 22, 24.
[43]"Congregational Polity," 25.
[44]"Congregational Polity," 27–8.
[45]"Congregational Polity," 28–9.
[46]"Congregational Polity," 30, 31.

Handbook for 1867 were training 255 students.[47] Notwithstanding the drawbacks inherent in the 'monastic seclusion of college life' and a curriculum which 'in these days of critical commentaries' still concentrated on 'the laborious acquisition of the elements of the Greek and Hebrew languages' at the expense of studying 'the art of effective public speaking', Fawcett felt that the system was fit for purpose.[48] He particularly liked the fact 'that it vests the right of choosing and dismissing the chief spiritual officer in spiritual persons', for such people were not satisfied with mere oratory and he queried 'the assumption … that a congregation like best the preacher who brings himself nearest to the level of their passions and prejudices':

> Men do not go to chapel expecting to be flattered, but hoping to be edified. The religious teachers most in favour among Congregationalists are not the dispensers of honeyed words and soothing remarks on the general excellence of mankind, and the particular virtues of the congregations before them, but the stern upholders of the dogma of the natural depravity of the human race, the preachers of self-distrust, and the unflinching denouncers of evil.[49]

What is striking about Fawcett's essay is that here is a layman's view, informed by a knowledge of manse life, focussing on the practicalities rather than the spiritualities of church fellowship, to describe a system that worked, and worked well more often than not, and fitted remarkably well into contemporary and evolving concepts of citizenship. Congregational Christians made good citizens. That was a telling point to make in the wake of the Second Reform Act and at the outset of Gladstone's first administration.

The Congregational system was itself evolving. When it came to church *membership*, there was 'a perceptible tendency to relax the ancient regulations, and to smooth the road from the congregation to the church'; and in 1868 the Congregational Union's Autumnal Meetings had considered terms of membership.[50] Church *discipline* was now 'almost exclusively limited to cases of immoral or unchristian conduct. Instances of the infliction of any penalty for heretical opinions are extremely rare':

> Each church has the right to decide for itself what are fundamental truths, and any infringement of the right of private judgment is viewed with extreme jealousy. It is not identity of belief, but spirituality of character and purity of life which are the essentials of membership.[51]

The lawyer in Fawcett came to the fore at such moments: 'heterodoxy is hard of proof, and there is no authoritative Congregationalist creed'.[52] There would be due reference to 'the essential articles of Christian faith, such as a belief in the

[47]"Congregational Polity," 33.
[48]"Congregational Polity," 32, 33.
[49]"Congregational Polity," 34, 36.
[50]"Congregational Polity," 39.
[51]"Congregational Polity," 42.
[52]Ibid.

Divinity of Christ and His atonement' but the latter, he noted in dry parenthesis, was 'a doctrine which the candidate would not be required to define'. R.W. Dale had yet to publish his *magnum opus*.[53]

It was in the general conduct of church affairs that a very contemporary concept of Christian citizenship took centre stage. Its basis was the 'strict Congregational theory' that 'every separate question as it arises ought to be submitted to the unbiased decision of the whole body of members'.[54] Thus, the pastor, 'though the president of the church, possesses, in strictness, no executive authority; for he is unable to do anything without the sanction of the church. In like manner, the deacons are the servants of the church. To them belong the administration of the temporalities of the society, the care of the fabric of the chapel, the management of the finances, and the distribution of the alms of the church'.[55] Fawcett then drew attention to a development in the larger churches:

> … a conference of the pastor and deacons is held before each meeting of the church, and at this cabinet council all questions to be brought before the members are discussed, and a course of action is decided upon, which, in the name of the deacons, is subsequently recommended for the adoption of the church.[56]

It seemed to him that this was, 'in fact, simply an adaptation of the mode of organization adopted by all our great voluntary religious and benevolent associations'.[57] Although he did not say so in so many words, it was in tune with the spirit of the age; it seemed,

> to some extent … to blend the steady and deliberate action of autocratic government with the ready acquiescence and wide interest which result from a popular vote. It also tends to counteract the evils which sometimes attend government by the majority. I am disposed, however, to think that these evils have been a good deal exaggerated.[58]

In short, 'At present it seems difficult to conceive of a system of church government giving greater liberty of choice to individuals than one in which each member has a direct voice in all the decisions of the church.'[59]

Fawcett's essential satisfaction with the Congregational system allowed him to contemplate some anomalies. There was, for example, the distinction between attenders and members. An *attender* had no voice in *church* affairs; a *member's* voice depended on a professed spirituality of character which could not realistically be assessed. Outsiders found that a hard, even unreal, distinction. Fawcett was unworried: 'There would seem to be no more absurdity in

[53]"Congregational Polity," 42. Robert William Dale (1829–1895) ministered at Carrs Lane Congregational Church, Birmingham from 1854 to 1895; his *Lectures on the Atonement* were published in 1875.
[54]"Congregational Polity," 43.
[55]Ibid.
[56]"Congregational Polity," 44.
[57]"Congregational Polity," 45.
[58]Ibid.
[59]"Congregational Polity," 46.

an inquiry into the worth of a man's spiritual life than in a similar investigation by an insurance company with reference to his physical life'.[60] He was more worried by some of the implications of spiritual equality. It was right that 'within the sacred fold all secular distinctions are dropped'. Was it quite so right that the 'most youthful member has an equal vote … with the oldest and wisest Christian' or, given that 'the women are usually admitted to the same privilege', there might be a tendency 'to precipitate action, and … to judge more by the feelings than by the reason', or that there was no part of the pastor's duties 'which may not be performed by any lay member'?[61] One suspects that Fawcett had squirmed too often as a man in the Baptist pew:

> The tyro, instead of serving an apprenticeship in the vestry, steps at once into the pulpit … His progress in theological knowledge depends on his own exertions; his glaring defects of speech or manner, his incoherent paragraphs, and wearisome repetitions are unreproved. The consequence is, that the lay preacher often mistakes his mission. In place of a simple and earnest exposition of the truths of Christianity, he aims at oratory; and while gazing at the stars, steps back into the ditch.[62]

In the course of his essay Fawcett cast an approving eye on Methodist practices, not least that 'great feature', the class meeting. He hoped to see such meetings integrated into Congregationalism. If they worked well:

> Each church instead of being a mere collection of guerrillas united to one leader, but knowing little of each other, would be a compact regiment, organized in companies, each man accustomed to fight shoulder to shoulder with his comrades. At present Congregational church fellowship is too often in reality only fellowship with the pastor. Once admitted, the member is sometimes wholly neglected and forgotten by his fellows.[63]

Cromwell's Ironsides, with a contemporary touch, perhaps, of Garibaldi? So much, of course, depended on the quality of Congregational fellowship. Just as 'Equality, though probably essential to perfect brotherhood, by no means necessarily implies it', so 'the true conception of the Congregational church, as a brotherhood of co-workers, is occasionally degraded into the notion of an association of co-payers'.[64]

William Mitchell Fawcett's exploration of Congregational polity is a celebration of belonging. It is objective, critical, and committed. What he wrote in that obscure essay of 1869 would speak in its fundamentals to successive generations of Baptists, Congregationalists and, over a century later, to many in the United Reformed Church. His own experience of that polity embraced churches in London, the industrial north, and the rural north and north-west, reaching back to the age of his great-grandfather Fawcett who had been exercised no

[60]"Congregational Polity," 48.
[61]"Congregational Polity," 49, 50.
[62]"Congregational Polity," 51–2.
[63]"Congregational Polity," 53.
[64]"Congregational Polity," 52, 53–4.

less by polity. It is, paradoxically, when he is most truly contemporary that he comes closest to the present generation. This minister's son and ship-owner's step-grandson turned barrister-at-law was class-conscious, as in 1869 he was bound to be. He reflected on this with regard to the lower middle class, the working classes, and his own professional sort, and their insistent bearing on the tone of Baptist and Congregational life:

> If the lower middle class is saturated with the commercial spirit, its religious institutions are not likely to be free from the same influence. Novelists who hold up to ridicule the Congregational Salem may find similar food for their humour in our town-councils, boards of guardians, and wherever indeed the small shop-keeping classes rule … With the infusion of a larger number of the working classes, may come a more perfect conception of brotherhood; with the addition of a larger proportion of the educated classes, there may be fostered that diffidence of individual opinion, taught by knowledge and intercourse with the world, which is so important to the harmonious working of a democratic society.[65]

He drew comfort from this in his lawyerly way, since,

> independently of all advantages of a spiritual nature, there must be some natural benefit in the existence of a large number of communities, each member of which professes to conform his life to a high moral standard, and is bound under penalty of exclusion to abstain from open sin.[66]

And to those who still urged that such a polity was too exalted a system for ordinary folk he had the perfect answer:

> It is no discredit to a Christian church that without Christianity it cannot succeed.[67]

Q.E.D., as he might, in debating mode, have said.

Notes on contributor

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[65]"Congregational Polity," 56.
[66]"Congregational Polity," 58.
[67]"Congregational Polity," 59.