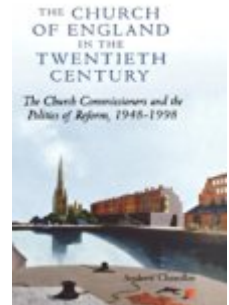


Andrew Chandler. *The Church of England in the Twentieth Century: The Church Commissioners and the Politics of Reform, 1948-1998.* Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2006. xii + 542 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84383-165-5.



Reviewed by D. L. LeMahieu

Published on H-Albion (June, 2007)

This well-written book offers a fresh approach to the often troubled history of the Church of England in the later half of the twentieth century. Unlike other narratives which focus on the Church's precipitous decline during a period of corrosive secularization, Andrew Chandler writes a detailed, institutional history of a key bureaucracy within the Church. The Church Commissioners managed the Church of England's vast property holdings and revenues accumulated over centuries. In the late twentieth century the supervision of this wealth became increasingly complicated as the demand for resources exceeded the supply of new revenue. Drawing upon the extensive archives of the Commissioners, as well as other primary sources, Chandler tells a story more fascinating than one might expect.

The Church Commissioners were created in 1948 by combining the work of two earlier bodies: Queen Anne's Bounty and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. Although there were ninety-five commissioners who met once a year, the central tasks of the bureaucracy were delegated structurally to groups such as the Estates and Finance Commit-

tee. Right from the start, these committees made business decisions that would deeply affect the health and morale of the Church. They sold bonds with safe but low returns to invest in the stock market, where increased risk usually generated far greater returns. By 1953, the Church Commissioners were the second-largest holders of stock in the country, eclipsed only by the Prudential. This wealth and fiduciary responsibility made some Archbishops uncomfortable.

The assets managed by the Commissioners served a number of purposes. The stipends for clergy, never generous, needed to be increased. As clergy aged, they needed pensions that maintained them in dignity during their final years. Bishops received higher pensions than clergy, but controversy erupted over whether some clergy deserved more retirement money than others. This issue of "differentials" was but one monetary problem facing the Pensions Board. The wives of clergyman also requested support to avoid penury if they outlived their husbands. Clergy who relied on the Church for housing needed some place to live when they retired. The fluctuat-

ing British economy of the 1960s and the inflationary spiral of the 1970s put further pressure on the Commissioners. Demands that the Church invest its money in an ethical manner created new complications. It was one thing to invest in a South African mining company. It was another matter when considering the stock of multinational corporations, such as the Midland Bank, which loaned a tiny percentage of its assets to the South African government. Chandler charts in detail this long and often contentious debate during the 1970s, noting the ethical cross-currents which troubled the Commissioners.

Some of the most poignant pages in Chandler's book concern another issue. The Church of England owned more landed property than any other institution in Britain. The rationalization of these property holdings by the Church Commissioners resulted in the sale of some properties and the more efficient management of others. Many churches simply could not be supported by a dwindling number of parishioners. Churches dating back to the Normans fell into neglect, their decay at once distressing and expensive. Aging vicars pottered around large, damp rectories that served fewer and fewer souls. Glebe lands lacked proper supervision. The sale of these properties inevitably provoked controversy as the religious heritage of a previous age confronted the economics of modernity. Private organizations sometimes assumed control; in other cases churches were sold to religious organizations such as the Greek Orthodox Church. In 1971, Moslems sought to purchase St. Mary, Savile Town, Wakefield, a redundant church built in 1900. After long deliberation and much consternation the church was demolished and the land sold to Moslems. Few decisions were without controversy. Auckland, residence of the bishops of Durham, included thirteen bedrooms, five state rooms, a chapel, and a separate wing called Scotland. Alarmed by the costs, the Commissioners suggested alternate quarters, but

the bishop, Ian Ramsey, insisted on further subsidies, a struggle that he eventually lost.

In the 1980s, the Church Commissioners faced a defining crisis. For a variety of reasons they began investing in more speculative commercial real estate, including in the United States, financed by debt at fluctuating rates of interest. Six major shopping centers comprised three-quarters of this investment in retail property. These investments began to deteriorate in value in the late 1980s and early 1990s at the same time that the interest rate to finance them increased dramatically. The Assets Committee needed to sell investments from other portfolios to finance these failing projects, including a move to sell stock in favor of fixed-interest gilts. They also tried to sell the shopping centers. The press, generally mistrusted by the Commissioners, got hold of the story, claiming that the Church lost over 500 million pounds, a figure that depended in part upon the vagaries of accounting. The result was devastating. Crisis and recrimination resulted in insistent demands for reform. As always, the Church took its time deliberating change, arguing possible alternatives, and establishing a new structure, which eventually took hold in 1998. As Chandler notes in his thoughtful conclusion, one colossal failure of the Church Commissioners drowned their earlier financial successes.

A detailed business history of the Church of England might not be the stuff of romance, but Chandler recounts his narrative with clarity and grace. In its lucid organization and patient engagement with detail, the book deserves comparison with the best institutional histories of the past fifty years. Chandler slyly acknowledges the dangers and biases of writing such narratives, including the tendency to exculpate your subject from outside blame. At times, he seems impatient with the notion of secularization and decline, even though his work demonstrates how, by focusing on the tasks at hand, bureaucrats and institutions can shield themselves from inconvenient realities.

The book would have benefited greatly from more comprehensive footnotes and from the inclusion of photographs, particularly of the church properties that the Commissioners sold, demolished, or rehabilitated. Even without such enhancements, however, this work adds enormously to understanding an important British institution undergoing an historic transition.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: D. L. LeMahieu. Review of Chandler, Andrew. *The Church of England in the Twentieth Century: The Church Commissioners and the Politics of Reform, 1948-1998*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. June, 2007.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13297>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.