

Swedenborgianism and Pugilism: the William White Affair

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The building at no. 1 Bloomsbury Street is today the premises of the socialist bookshop 'Bookmarks', but from 1855 to 1925 (it was originally no. 36 Bloomsbury Street) it was the headquarters or

attained a revelatory level higher than Swedenborg's'. He had set out these views in his book (1858) and an appendix to this called (provocatively) (1860).⁵ A charismatic preacher, Harris came to England in 1859 where he and his wife stayed in London with that eminent English Swedenborgian Dr James John Garth Wilkinson (1812–1899). Harris wrote a poem, 'Regina', which was addressed to Wilkinson's daughter Emma.⁶ He preached in the Steinway Hall, Wigmore Street where his listeners included the writer William Howitt (1792–1879),⁷ who described Harris's extempore sermons as '...the only realisation of my conceptions of eloquence':⁸

They were triumphant embodiments of sublime poetry, and a stern, unsparing, yet loving and burning theology.⁹

Also impressed with Harris's 'wild eloquence' were Lady Oliphant and her son Laurence Oliphant (1829–1888), the writer and Member of Parliament, both of whom joined Harris's Brotherhood of t

Society clearly were not. Unlike the Wilkinsons, the majority were members of the organised New Church and took great affront that Harris's books should be offered alongside Swedenborg's divinely-commissioned works. The Chairman of the Society, an office that he had held almost continuously since the late 1820s, was Dr John Spurgin (1796–1866), Physician to the Foundling Hospital in Bloomsbury who, as a young medical student at Guy's Hospital, had acted as a mentor to John Keats, even writing earnest letters to the poet from Cambridge encouraging him to read Swedenborg.¹² The leader of those vehemently opposed to the sale of Harris's books was the Revd Dr Jonathan Bayley (1811–1886), a pugnacious Lancastrian who had shared Anti-Corn Law League platforms with Cobden and Bright and who was at that time minister of the New Jerusalem Church at Argyle Square, King's Cross where in just a few years he had attracted a large flock.¹³ He was supported by Samuel Warren, a young American who became Secretary of the Society for a few years and then a minister of the New Church in the United States, and Henry Butter, author of Butter's _____, a youthful founder member of the Society in 1810 who was to become its Secretary when he was nearly seventy and serve in that capacity for eight years. Clissold, a close friend of Bayley, leaned towards the majority, but was later to take a conciliatory role later in the dispute.

Although the Secretary and the Treasurer, William Fryer, supported White, the majority of the committee secured the passing of a resolution stating that it was deemed '...inexpedient that the writings of the Rev. TL Harris, or any other works commonly called spiritualistic, shall be kept in stock or exposed for sale in the society's house, and that the manager be requested not to permit his name to appear as publisher or agent upon any such works, or to be advertised as a seller of them'.¹⁴ A letter was sent to White repeating the terms of the resolution, which had been passed on the 5th July, and assuring him that the Society would indemnify him against pecuniary loss.

In his reply, dated 2nd August, White maintained that his contract with the Society permitted him to carry on business as an independent bookseller and publisher. The Society had no involvement in his profits or losses. He had laboured for years to build up his business. The committee's resolution

In support of White, William Wilkinson requested the committee to hold a general meeting of the Society at which it was proposed to add a new rule allowing the manager to carry on business as an independent bookseller and publisher on his own responsibility. The committee declined to hold this meeting, having discovered that there had been a sudden influx of new members procured, it

spirit'. Jem Mace having, as the article puts it, heard of Swedenborg's angels, regarded the figure on the table brandishing a sword as a celestial visitant and decided that a display of the 'muscular Christianity' made fashionable by the Revd Charles Kingsley¹⁹ would be in order. Removing his coat

In the event, the Chancery case did not come back to court and both parties agreed to submit to the arbitration of Clissold, who made a substantial contribution to the costs.²⁰ White did, however, sue the committee members in the Court of Common Pleas for damages for trespass by entering his property and taking possession of his stock in trade. By the date of the trial in February 1861 White no longer had any property on the premises and the Lord Chief Justice directed the jury to enter a non-suit.²¹

The affair was the subject of an article in _____ for 12 January 1861²² under the title 'Swedenborgianism in Difficulties'. The writer saw the dispute as one between the 'old orthodox Swedenborgians' associated with the New Jerusalem Church under the leadership of 'the stout Dr Bayley' who argued that Spiritualism was a disgrace to Swedenborg and his memory, and the 'neologist Swedenborgians' under Wilkinson, 'the eager champion of spiritualism'. The writer seems

Chancery.²⁶ Dr Spurgin continued as chairman for several more years. He died in 1866, his death having been hastened by severe injuries received when he was attacked by street robbers.²⁷ Dr Jonathan Bayley established another New Jerusalem church at Palace Gardens Terrace, Kensington in 1871 where he attracted a large congregation. Bayley died in 1886, but his two sons continued to be prominent in the Swedenborg Society for many years. His younger son Edward, a businessman and briefly a Liberal MP, was active in the Society into the 1930s.²⁸ Warren was Secretary of the Society for a few years before becoming a minister of the New Church in the USA. He compiled a
of Swedenborg's writings which the American Swedenborg Foundation has recently reprinted.²⁹ Henry Butter succeeded him as Secretary, served for eight years and died in 1885 in his ninety-first year.³⁰

William White took his revenge on the New Church in a biography of Swedenborg he published in

directed his fire at the New