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**“An Indelible Mark”? Gerald Sharp
as Archbishop of Brisbane 1921 to
1933**

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In August 1933 Gerald Sharp, fourth occupant of the See of Brisbane, died generously mourned by the community of south-east Queensland. His rival in archi-episcopal office, the Roman Catholic prelate James Duhig, wrote of him as “the most lovable man I knew.”¹ Sharp and Duhig had a special bond. They each shared the ideal of a celibate priesthood, and Sharp’s ritualist anglo-catholicism meant that each drew religious inspiration from a common tradition. Protestants spoke equally approvingly of Sharp. Wesleyans, Presbyterians, Baptists and Congregationalists all saw in his sincerity, brotherliness and gentleness, a genuine Christian humility.² The *Brisbane Courier* spoke for most when it summed up the Archbishop as “a simple and good man”.³

Clearly Queenslanders approved of Sharp. In this publicly spoken approval lies his significance as an historical figure. The community spoke generously of Sharp because it recognised in him a bishop of the Church of England who understood its expectations of the

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role of religion, and the place the Church of England should occupy, in the Australian community. Not all bishops, whether Anglican or Roman Catholic, acquitted community expectations. Mannix's behaviour as a Roman Catholic religious leader earned him considerable community disapproval. Among protestant non-conformist leaders too, many Anglican bishops were still suspected of hankering or grasping after a special relationship with the state, or of adopting a remote, if not exactly lordly, prelatical posture. A little of this had tinged the career of Sharp's very able predecessor, St. Clair Donaldson, and reappeared in his quite brilliant successor, W. C. C. Wand, both of whom were translated to prestigious English Sees, Donaldson to Salisbury and Wand to Bath and Wells and finally to London. By contrast, Sharp died in Queensland where he quickly found obscurity. Today, he would be the least remembered of the Bishops and Archbishops of Brisbane. By contrast, when Sharp vacated office, he was the most warmly spoken of. The community approved of his episcopal demeanour and his interpretation of episcopal authority; it approved of the role he sought out for the Church of England in contemporary society; it approved of the public issues he took up and of his church's behaviour in victory or defeat. In short, Sharp served up Christianity in general, and Anglicanism in particular, in a style Queenslanders found eminently acceptable. Sharp is therefore an apt figure through which to study public approval (and therefore its expectations) of the role of religion, and of the place of the Church of England, in Australian public life between the two great world wars.

APPOINTED FROM NEW GUINEA

The diocese of Brisbane elected Sharp archbishop in 1921. Unlike all his predecessors, whom the Archbishop of Canterbury had selected, Sharp was the deliberate choice of the local diocese made under conditions where a genuine local knowledge was available.⁴ From 1910 to 1921 Sharp had been bishop of New Guinea and a frequent visitor to Brisbane. The diocese obviously recognised in Sharp the qualities it desired for an Archbishop of Brisbane. What might the synod have known of Sharp?

Sharp's New Guinea episcopate disclosed that he was pre-eminently, indeed almost exclusively, a pastor. His religious ambition was to sanctify the individual, the home, the work-place and the community gathering. Moreover, Sharp did not turn to the government to aid the mission. He made the mission live off the voluntary principle. Sharp repudiated the policy of his New Guinea predecessor, Stone-Wigg, who had acquired land to develop into industrial (i.e. agricultural) estates. Properly managed these estates would undoubtedly have generated considerable wealth for the mission and given it an added political influence as a substantial land

owner. Instead, Sharp returned Stone-Wigg's land acquisition to the natives, and in doing so purchased a moral freedom to criticize the immorality of white settler (especially company) exploitation of the natives. Sharp rested the authority of the church on the comfort and strength to be found in its religious beliefs and in the mercies the mission could deliver through education and medicine. In addition, Sharp had worked harmoniously with the administrator, Hubert Murray, and shared with him the belief that the ultimate benefit of the new European presence should be the introduction of civil society. Sharp's challenge was to christianize that civil society by example and exhortation.⁵

What more could Queenslanders desire than to transfer this man and these ideals to the Australian mainland. In Sharp they recognized the non-sectarian churchman who wanted to sanctify life by example and persuasion, and who deliberately declined to construct a power base from which to advantage his own church. Sharp's aim was to bring a Christian influence to bear on the workings of civil society. In many ways Sharp fulfilled the ideal which Queensland adopted at separation when it voted to terminate religious subsidies under the Church Acts and turn Queensland into a model colony "where the people enjoyed a larger share of civil and religious liberty than in the mother country".⁶

In addition, Brisbane churchmen could confidently expect that Sharp would concentrate his energy on domestic religious affairs. He had done so in New Guinea. His predecessor in the Brisbane See had an expansive intellect and often tested the patience of churchmen by lecturing them on world affairs, even at synod. "The War seemed to demand such a wide view", wrote a leading layman, "but the problems and pressing needs of our Church in Australia, and for us more particularly in this Diocese, now claim our undivided attention". In Sharp, Anglicans hoped for, and got, a bishop content to confine himself "almost exclusively to matters affecting our Church policy and work".⁷

On 16 November 1921 Brisbane welcomed Sharp as its second Archbishop confident that he would be content to strive after the maximum Christian influence compatible with civil harmony.

THE CHURCH AND COMMUNITY VALUES

Sharp became Archbishop at the beginning of a decade of re-adjustment after World War I. This adjustment subtly, but considerably, affected the churches. Before the Great War, Australian life, like life in England, was regulated by a complex set of institutions each more or less autonomous in a specific area of community life. Government itself was only one of several such influential institutions. Others included the judiciary, the churches, the banks,



Archbishop Gerald Sharp

Anglican Church Archives, Brisbane.

the universities and grammar schools, such professions as medicine and the law, the great metropolitan newspapers, etc. Within limits individuals could choose how much regulation to submit to both for their own personal good and for the public good. So long as individuals were free to choose between a variety of regulatory institutions, and were at liberty to move from one to another, the restriction imposed on life by this network of institutions was not considered oppressive. World War I altered this. The task of mobilizing a total society for war and of returning that society to a peaceful civil order required an exceptional degree of new government regulation.⁸ Moreover, the war excited communities and individuals to new goals and loosened the appeal of many historic institutions. To accomplish these new goals the government either accepted direct responsibility for them, or created new institutions to fulfil them. In particular during the 1920s the government imposed greater institutional regulation over two areas: the work factor in Australian life and the acquisition and distribution of material benefits. To offset these new controls the government gradually abandoned regulations touching upon traditional religious and moral goals. The government reasoned that by permitting a greater personal freedom in religious and moral matters, it could distract attention from the very considerable enlargement of state powers over the material aspects of civil society. In the 1920s the churches were one institution of civil society which had to learn to survive increasingly on an appeal to conscience. It could be anticipated that the Church of England, accustomed to a measure of influence, might resist and fight to retain a maximum formative influence over public and private life, by law where possible. Sharp's record indicated that he would adapt to the changed regulatory environment of the 1920s and rely on persuasion and example to maintain a religious influence over community life.

The late-Victorian religious world, which shaped Sharp's mind, clearly identified religion with morality. At one extreme was a protestant evangelical tradition which censored all human folly as destructive of godliness, and it consequently preached a stern prohibitive moral code. Sharp avoided this tradition. Instead, he fell under Tractarian (or what he called Anglo-Catholic) influences, and identified John Keble's *The Christian Year* as a formative influence in his life.⁹ Only Tennyson's *In Memoriam* outsold Keble's *The Christian Year* in the nineteenth century. Keble took over Bishop Butler's idea that creation (including man and woman) can approach God and develop an ever-deepening relationship with God, especially by striving for moral perfection. Keble's poetry showed readers how to strive; and he constantly emphasised the primacy of fixing the mind on correct belief. If a person's beliefs were true, and the mind

dwelled on them, then the rest, including godly moral behaviour, would follow. The practical result was an image of the Christian as a believer seeking after perfection by what John Henry Newman described as “simple earnestness and sweet gravity”.¹⁰

These were the values Sharp brought to Brisbane. Interestingly, a contemporary of Keble’s remarked that “if Keble’s character had been roughened by contact with the world, his poetry would have lacked much of what constituted its appeal”.¹¹ South-east Queensland in the 1920s was a fairly “roughened” community, and it is a marvel that Sharp received a hearing. Yet, it was whenever Sharp spoke up on a moral issue that Queenslanders were most inclined to accept his point of view as valuable comment.¹² Often a community accepts a periodic admonition as salutary in restoring perspective (or balance) to the worldliness natural to it.

INVOLVEMENT IN MORAL ISSUES

The synod of 1922 met amid a mounting campaign for a referendum on prohibition, and Sharp supported those campaigning for a reduction in hotel trading hours.¹³ The following year, 1923, Sharp used his synod address to attack the prevalence of gambling in the community, and he accused the government, through its ownership of the Golden Casket and its policy of regulating Art Unions, for bestowing an unhealthy legitimacy on this all-too-prevalent gambling. “There are some countries in Southern Europe where a system of State lotteries prevails”, Sharp added, “and the system has produced a decadent spirit, which it seems a pity, to say the least of it, that a glorious State in a glorious progressive country like ours, should do anything to emulate or foster”.¹⁴ In the synod of 1924, Sharp criticised the growing practice of Sunday sport and the opening of public parks to noisy entertainment.¹⁵ On all these issues he was respectfully heard, and respectfully ignored.

Although Sharp often spoke out on moral issues, the *Brisbane Courier* noted that “he was never the leader in any great controversy”.¹⁶ During the prohibition debate of 1922, Sharp dissented from his own Synod’s majority resolution advising “Church people of this diocese to vote in favour of Prohibition at the State Referendum in October next”.¹⁷ Although Sharp opposed lotteries he bluntly told Synod that “harmful as I think gambling to be, I could not join an anti-gambling society”.¹⁸ Distressed as he was at “hearing the air rent by the yells from spectators” at sports in parks on Sundays he nevertheless admitted: “I am not what is called a strict Sabatarian”.¹⁹

Sharp’s hesitancy to be absolute (or fanatical) in his attitudes undoubtedly had many origins — some genetic, others the result of his family moulding, etc. It was also part of his consciously constructed technique as a pastor. His primary goal was to win a hear-

ing for the Church's teachings about the divinity of Christ, the redemption open to mankind, etc. He deliberately avoided off-putting criticism which promoted "an idea of God as mainly a God of repression". He urged his Synod to discard the simplistic notion, often learned in Sunday school and never un-learned, "that God is only on the watch to find us out in some sin". He went on:

It is unfortunate when he whom we call the "man in the street", who may be — and very often is — quite a good fellow, and usually very attractive, gets the impression that the Church is down on everything that he wants to do. It leads to a wrong idea of God and of the Christian religion ...²⁰

Ever since the rum culture of the convict era and the boisterous individualism of the gold rushes, the task of building up a civil society in Australia had had to wrestle against the debilitation of alcohol and the corrosion of gambling. The dominant censorious evangelical character of Australian religion, both protestant and catholic, turned it into a natural ally of the state in this struggle.²¹ By 1900 civil society was secure, and Australians looked for something less strident than the traditional censoriousness of their colonial religious leaders. Sharp's much admired "great broad-minded Christianity"²² answered to that public need, and he helped consolidate a style of Anglicanism which the community could continue to accept as having a civic usefulness. Sharp's episcopate helped both to define and to consolidate the style of Anglicanism which in the future would enable it to fulfil its traditional belief in the unity of church and state.

ECUMENISM AND AUTONOMY

Early in his episcopate, Sharp expressed a "strong affection ... for Australia and Australians". He said: "There is no country in the world in which I would rather live than Australia, and it is not the beautiful climate only that makes me feel and say this!"²³ What, in addition to the climate, attracted Sharp can only be guessed at. One good guess is, the opportunity Australia provided for experiment and change. "We members of the Church of England in Australia", he once stated, "may well be proud of the fact that in certain ways we have improved upon the ways of the Church in England itself".²⁴ In two areas Sharp rushed ahead: the ecumenical movement and ecclesiastical self-government.

The Lambeth Conference of 1920 resolved to seek a measure of reunion with three major protestant denominations, the Presbyterians, Wesleyans and Congregationalists. The proposed method was to encourage all ministers whose scruples could bear it to submit to the ordination procedures of each of the churches, and thereby secure an authority to minister in each of the churches. Sharp, despite his strong Anglo-Catholic commitment, urged his clergy to accept this process of multiple ordination. He told them:

Such an ordination would add nothing in our minds to the validity of our ministerial commission. It would not make us one whit more Bishops or priests of the Church of God than we were before. But it would satisfy the scruples of those whose fellowship we desire, who have something to give to us and to whom we have something to give.²⁵

Sharp miscalculated the presbyterian abhorrence of episcopacy, and it took only one conference in Cronulla, New South Wales, in 1922 to collapse the scheme. Sharp refused to be deterred by the Cronulla decision and crusaded on, almost alone among the Australian bishops. He based his optimism on the preparedness of new settlements to break with historical traditions and to override theoretical obstructions to practical solutions. "It is jealous zeal for particular theories which has divided Christendom", Sharp reminded his synod. "In the Lambeth proposals theoretical considerations about the ministry are waived ... they require no submission to theories about the church and ministry, but only recognition of facts."²⁶ Unfortunately, separation from England did not water-down theological conservatism. It strengthened it by separating it from intellectual debate. Even so, Sharp's appeal was in accord with the non-sectarian tradition of Australian public life. This tradition dated back to the 1830s; and in the 1870s it produced the so-called free, secular and compulsory state education systems. It applauded anything which mitigated the social divisiveness of sectarianism. Sharp's ecumenicism was firmly in this Australian public tradition, and enhanced his public reputation as an *Australian* bishop, despite its absolute religious failure.

Sharp also found himself in a minority position on ecclesiastical self-government. The issue was simply this: "Whether we, as a Synod, favour the principle of autonomy in the Church in Australia or not". Seventy years after responsible self-government and twenty years after Federation, the Church of England in Australia had no authority "to deal with liturgical and doctrinal questions"; or, as it was put at the time: "The Church is in the anomalous position of having excluded from the category of the things about which it is competent to legislate, precisely those questions which are peculiarly its province".²⁷ Whatever the Church of England in England decided in matters of ritual and doctrine was binding on the Church of England in Australia, and anything any diocese did to vary ritual and doctrine in Australia could be challenged in the English ecclesiastical courts. The only means of escape was for individual synods to ask individual parliaments to pass legislation giving a synod the right to reform its ritual and doctrine. That meant that any subsequent dispute over the synod's action had to be argued out in the state civil courts.

Sharp considered neither of these provisions satisfactory and, in 1924, and again in 1927, urged his synod to support legislation to be put to all state parliaments giving the Church of England autonomy, i.e. a right to vary its rituals and doctrines and a system of courts or tribunals of its own to settle disputes.²⁸ Sharp did not overcome his opposition until 1927, and to do so had to argue against the proposition that Australia was in essence an extension of England abroad rather than a nation in the sense that Italy, France and Ireland were nations apart from England. Sharp insisted on Australia's independent nationality. Sharp considered Australia's destiny as an independent nation so significant that he even accepted office as Queensland president of the League of Nations Association to encourage the churches to support an Australian role within that League. In many of his habits Sharp remained very English; yet it was another Englishman working closely with him who saw through the habits of the exterior man: "An Englishman by birth", wrote Horace Dixon, "the Archbishop also made himself a great Australian. He did not regard himself as an exile".²⁹ Indeed, to drive home his conviction that there was a worthwhile Australian experience to draw on, he angrily condemned English arrogance in proceeding with a revision of the Book of Common Prayer without consultation with Australians.³⁰

DEFENDER OF MINORITIES

Sharp's commitment to fostering Australia's independent nationality saw him adopt a higher than usual profile in two public matters: the celebration of Anzac day and European immigration. In the 1920s Queenslanders believed, rightly or wrongly, that they had created Anzac Day:

Queensland has every reason to be proud of creating the observance of Anzac Day, and therefore has a solemn responsibility in maintaining its solemn observance and in checking any tendency to turn the day into one of amusement and pleasure-seeking.³¹

Sharp was consecrated a bishop in Brisbane on 25 April 1910. After returning as Archbishop to Brisbane in 1921 he appears to have dedicated the annual memorial of his consecration to the memory of Anzac.³² Sharp saw in Anzac Day the first opportunity Australians had to Christianize a national day, and he worked through the Commemoration Committee to achieve that. State government legislation in 1922 set the tone by closing down hotels and racecourses. Sharp added a "great Requiem Eucharist at 11 o'clock" in St John's Cathedral as the distinctively Anglican contribution. In promoting this requiem Sharp carefully avoided the bad theology of those clergy who drew a parallel between the political liberty secured through the sacrifice of soldiers and the liberty won through the sacrifice of Christ. "That we should remember them (the soldiers) before God

in our prayers is the chief purpose of our services”, he wrote.³³ Outside the Requiem and at public meetings he joined in the promotion of an emergent Anzac myth: “They, on the first Anzac Day, and throughout the war, conferred a glory on Australia and New Zealand that will never fade”. And he called upon Australians both to celebrate the “heroism, self-sacrifice and endurance” of the Anzacs and to imitate it in their national life. To fail in this would be to “inherit a legacy which was in no sense deserved”.³⁴ By 1924 Sharp thought the conjunction of a great public Christian requiem which called the nation to prayer with public rallies extolling the national heroic virtues “simply perfection” for an Australian national day.³⁵

Sharp’s interest in immigration stemmed directly from his conviction that Australia was a new emergent nation, and he wanted to shape it well: “The need for more white people to populate Australia is vital, and it is our own white people that we would prefer to have”.³⁶ In 1926 Sharp formed a Church of England Immigration Council to help settle any immigrants referred to it. Anglicans received no preference. The Council was an institution formed by members of the Church of England for service to the community. Naturally Sharp was delighted whenever he could report an increase in “the immigrants of our own race and Church”. He also despised prejudice, and upbraided a Royal Commission Report of 1925 for suggesting that Italian settlers in the north were essentially undesirable aliens:

... the Italians are a cultured race, and quite certainly of white race
 ... and provided the Italian immigrants be hard-working, thrifty, certified as being in good health, not destitute, but bringing the required amount of capital into the country, these Italian immigrants would be likely to be an asset to the country rather than the reverse.³⁷

The key point here is Sharp’s insistence that the Italians were, officially, a white race. It was typical of him that he should search for some mechanism or some formula to heal divisions and remove hurts. Like most men with a capacity for leadership, Sharp had his strong prejudices: he believed in the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race; he was a royalist and a Tory; he was an Anglo-Catholic and ritualist; he was a celibate priest who thought early clerical marriage a weakness; he was so prudish that he once condemned beauty competitions “as absolutely abhorrent to every considering Christian man and woman”;³⁸ he thought gambling and hotels an iniquity. Yet Sharp moderated all of these prejudices, refusing to foist them onto an essentially different society. Just how different Sharp was in temperament from the community he served is captured in this protest against Sunday sport:

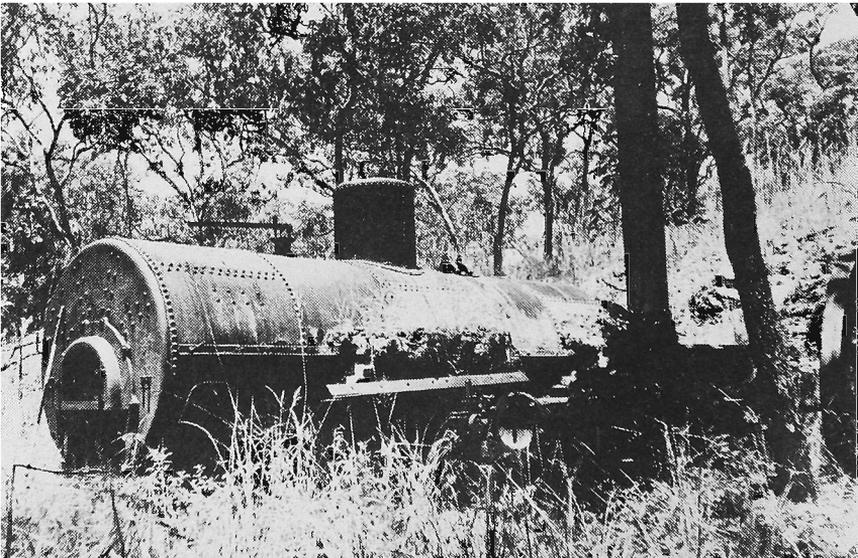
I feel for those many people who like to use the parks on Sunday afternoons in a quiet way ... I do not think it is right to ride roughshod over the feelings of those quiet people.³⁹

The community rode roughshod over them, sport on Sundays increased, and Sharp said nothing more. Sharp realized he lived in a rapidly changing post-World War I world and that he had remained essentially a late-Victorian religious romantic. Sharp firmly held to the truths he learned in that late-Victorian society and spoke up for them, yet he declined to speak out stridently in their defence against a state with no commitment to them. As such he became a mild and gentle conscience to a state increasingly dedicated to other goals. This was the balance the Australian state desired, and still desires. Sharp met these expectations, and other Archbishops of Brisbane who have done the same, notably Reginald Halse, have met with the same affectionate approval. Whether such men leave “an indelible mark” on their generation, as some thought Sharp would, depends on whether the future belongs to the Darwinists or to the Christ of the Gospels; that is, whether ultimate influence belongs to those who stridently conquer, like the great reformers of the sixteenth century, or to those, like Sharp, who in an increasingly secular and materialist society work “simply by the power of ... unselfish and splendid love”.⁴⁰

FOOTNOTES

1. Keith Rayner, *History of the Church of England in Queensland* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Queensland), p. 439.
2. *Church Chronicle*, Nov. 1933, p. 338 (Anglican Church Archives, Brisbane).
3. *Brisbane Courier*, 31 August 1933.
4. *Church Chronicle*, Oct 1921, pp. 190-91; *Brisbane Courier*, 22 Sept and 17 Nov 1923.
5. David Wetherell, *Reluctant Mission* (U. of Q. Press, St. Lucia, 1977) pp. 219-21, 234.
6. *Moreton Bay Courier*, 5 July 1860 (Macalister's speech).
7. *Church Chronicle*, July 1922, p. 132.
8. See A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945* (Oxford, 1965), Chs. 1, 4.
9. *Diocese of Brisbane Year Book*, 1924, pp. 21-3; 1927, p. 27; 1931, p. 23. (Hereafter cited as *Year Book*).
10. Brian Martin, *John Keble. Priest, Professor and Poet* (Croom Helm, London, 1976), pp. 119-21.
11. Martin, *John Keble*, p. 116.
12. *Brisbane Courier*, 31 Aug. 1933.
13. *Year Book*, 1924, p. 18; *Church Chronicle*, July 1922, p. 135.
14. *Year Book*, 1923, pp. 22-3.
15. *Year Book*, 1924, pp. 24-6.
16. *Brisbane Courier*, 31 Aug. 1933.

17. *Church Chronicle*, July 1922, p. 135.
18. *Year Book*, 1924, p. 19.
19. *Year Book*, 1924, p. 26.
20. *Year Book*, 1923, p. 23.
21. On this topic see, George Shaw, 'Crucifix or Centrefold? A Moral Dilemma for Pluralism in Australia', *Journal of Christian Education*, Papers 76, April 1983, pp. 5-19.
22. *Church Chronicle*, Oct. 1923, p. 306.
23. *Year Book*, 1923, p. 15.
24. *Year Book*, 1925, p. 28.
25. *Year Book*, 1923, p. 22.
26. *Year Book*, 1923, p. 21.
27. 'Autonomy' in *Year Book*, 1924, pp. 59-67.
28. *Year Book*, 1924, pp. 20-1; 1927, pp. 25-27.
29. *Brisbane Courier*, 31 Aug. 1933.
30. *Year Book*, 1923, p. 18; 1929, pp. 20-22.
31. *Church Chronicle*, Apr. 1924, p. 69; see also Deputy Premier Gillies' speech, *Brisbane Courier*, 26 Apr. 1924.
32. *Year Book*, 1922, p. 15; 1923, p. 17; 1924, p. 17.
33. *Church Chronicle*, June 1924, p. 107 (For Anzac Day legislation see *Q.P.D.* 1921, vol. 137, pp. 886-889, vol. 138, pp. 1094-6, 1480).
34. *Brisbane Courier*, 26 Apr. 1924.
35. *Church Chronicle*, June 1924, p. 107.
36. *Year Book*, 1924, p. 24.
37. *Year Book*, 1925, p. 24-26.
38. *Year Book*, 1927, p. 21.
39. *Year Book*, 1924, p. 26.
40. *Church Chronicle*, Oct. 1933, p. 291 (Horace Dixon).



The Alexandra Boiler, a reminder of Palmer History.

John Hay