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Ships of Heaven. The private life of Britain's cathedrals, by Christopher Somerville,
London, Doubleday, 2019, x + 342 pp., £20 (hardback), ISBN 978 0 8575 2364 8

Over recent years increasing attention has been paid to various aspects of cathedral life –their ministry and mission, governance, history and heritage– and to the best ways to secure their fabric and future. In 2017, we saw the publication of the report of Lord Bourne’s inquiry into the diverse roles of modern English cathedrals (*Cathedrals and their communities*) and of The Taylor Review (*Sustainability of English churches and cathedrals*). In 2018, the first National Cathedrals Conference took place, when around 400 delegates gathered in Manchester to facilitate development of a strategic vision for the future direction for cathedrals. In the same year, the final report of the Church of England’s Cathedrals Working Group (GS2101A) was published. Popular reactions to the fire at Notre Dame in Paris in Holy Week 2019 caused many commentators to reflect on the symbolic power and significance of cathedral buildings. Interest in cathedrals is also strong among academic colleagues; and the book *Anglican cathedrals in modern life* (Leslie J. Francis, 2015, Palgrave Macmillan: New York) made a case for ‘cathedral studies’ as an emergent field. A substantial contribution to ongoing work in the field was made by the research team on the three-year Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project ‘Pilgrimage and England’s cathedrals, past and present’, based at the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture at the University of York, from 2014 to 2017.

The publication of *Ships of Heaven* by Christopher Somerville, walking correspondent of *The Times* newspaper, is timely. The book quickly rose to be the number one best seller in the ‘religious architecture’ ranking on a well-known bookseller’s website (eclipsing Simon Jenkins’ volume on cathedrals). But do not expect *Ships of Heaven* to be an architectural guidebook: as Somerville himself notes in his introduction, there are more than

enough of those. Somerville also claims that *Ships of Heaven* is not an historical guidebook; but it does contain plenty of history. Neither is the book a work of rigorous academic scholarship; yet, it is no less valuable for that. *Ships of Heaven* is a voyage of discovery around a personal selection of cathedrals. Full of interviews with insightful people (clergy, vastly experienced guides and expert craftsmen and women) who have wide knowledge of and love for their cathedrals, *Ships of Heaven* is akin to *The Cathedral. Behind open doors - talking with people who give their lives to a cathedral*, written about Lincoln by another journalist, Danny Danziger (1989, Viking: London).

Some of the cathedrals chosen by Somerville are ‘old favourites’, which he had already visited many times, while others were new to him. It is not clear precisely what guided his selection. There are 17 chapters covering a total of 22 cathedrals, including five of the ‘big six’ in England, and cathedrals as far flung as Inverness in Scotland, Kirkwall in Orkney, St Davids in west Wales (Britain’s smallest city) and Armagh in Northern Ireland (where the visit takes in both the Roman Catholic and the Protestant cathedrals). In Westminster and Liverpool also, Somerville’s itinerary includes the Catholic and Anglican cathedrals.

Somerville begins his voyage at Wells Cathedral (which made a significant impression on him as a small boy); and he ends it holed up in St Andrew’s Cathedral in Inverness on a cold and snowy December afternoon, his return trip to Kirkwall to witness the Festival of St Lucy having been halted by Storm Caroline. At the outset, Somerville recognises that he has a lot of learning to do. He confesses that he is not really sure what bishops and deans do, nor what a cathedral canon is. Gaps in Somerville’s knowledge are swiftly filled by engaging interviewees such as Peter Hancock, Bishop of Bath & Wells and Robert Titley, Canon of Salisbury. Somerville is not familiar with Philip Larkin’s poem ‘Church Going’ until it is mentioned by Vicky Johnson, Canon of Ely.

Ships of Heaven sheds some light on themes typical of those running through the well-known edited collections of essays by Stephen Platten and Christopher Lewis, *Flagships of the Spirit* (1998, Darton, Longman & Todd: London) and *Dreaming Spires?* (2006, SPCK: London). At St Davids, Wyn Evans (the retired Bishop, who ‘holds court daily to answer any and every query about his beloved cathedral’) reports a big rise in the number of pilgrims since the 1960s when services were first televised; and he explains that they ‘hope to turn visitors into pilgrims’. At Salisbury, Canon Robert speaks about the different motivations of those who visit the cathedral: believers, non-believers, and explicit and implicit pilgrims on journeys of faith. He also explains how the cathedral attracts the homeless, the despairing and the disturbed. Then at York, Somerville describes a dishevelled young woman sitting on a bench near the south door of the Minster: ‘surrounded by bags and backpacks, she drags hungrily and deeply on a roll-up, shivering and twitching, one of those lost in the dark theme park that Canon Robert Titley talked about’ (p. 104). Somerville also reminds his readers of the particular contributions of Chichester and Salisbury Cathedrals to modern art; and of the pressing need for rigorously trained stonemasons.

Somerville gleans some fascinating snippets of information on his voyage: for instance, the average spend per visitor to Durham Cathedral is thirty-five pence (a tiny contribution towards the daily expenses of £5,000); and Lincoln is the only cathedral that still operates its own quarry. Somerville learns from a guide at St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall that some of the stonemasons’ marks there are identical to marks in Durham Cathedral, showing that the much-in-demand workforce was mobile. Somerville sees a ‘Holy Duster’ at Salisbury cleaning an intricate monument with a home-made implement (‘a Hoover brush nailed to a stick’); and he learns at Durham that being a cathedral Broderer (embroiderer) is a very sociable activity, just like in medieval times. At Worcester, Somerville gains a different

perspective on the cathedral building in the company of his godson Andy Harrison, a geologist.

There are poignant moments as well, two of which occur at Liverpool's Metropolitan Cathedral. In the Children's Chapel, Somerville comes across a Babies' Memorial Book where beribboned tickets have been inscribed with poems and messages from bereaved families whose babies have 'no known grave' or died soon after birth. In the archive room, he opens a cardboard box containing some of the scarves laid on a temporary altar set up outside on the piazza for a Mass on the day after the Hillsborough football ground tragedy in 1989. In Ely Cathedral, at a shrine to the dead of the First World War in the Chapel of St George, Somerville is horrified at the sheer number of names on the hinged boards on the wall: 'a whole forest of men cut down in their prime'.

Somerville tells of conscience struggles at Coventry and Liverpool: would money have been better spent on housing, schools and hospitals, than on cathedral building projects? He tells dark tales of the 'poisonous row' among chapter members at Lincoln in the 1990s and the impact of the Occupy London protest on the chapter of St Paul's. Somerville also tells of the impact on the city of Salisbury of the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter; and of the sensitive and prayerful response to the crisis by the Bishop, acting dean and cathedral staff.

We have become used to cathedrals being called 'shop-windows of the Church of England' and 'flagships of the Spirit'. Nautical epithets form the unifying theme of Somerville's book. Some are familiar. Some are more effective than others. At the 'Ship of the Fens', Canon Vicky (who served as a parish priest in Manchester before her appointment to the chapter of Ely) likens parish priests to captains of a frigate: 'the ship is light and manoeuvrable, and you have to be, too', she says. By contrast, a cathedral canon is a 'senior officer of a supertanker': 'it's hard to slow or change its course, harder still to stop it and start

again, largely because of its size' (p. 151). For her, cathedrals are 'centres of stability and reliability'; and, as flagships, 'they inspire confidence in the Church and what it can do' (p. 154).

The text is accompanied by 16 pages of photographs: among them are exquisite interior and exterior shots and pictures of some of the people Somerville met on his voyage. The book is dedicated 'To the Holy Dusters of Salisbury Cathedral, and all the cathedral volunteers up and down the land, without whose generosity and hard work the Ships of Heaven would very soon run aground'. There is a short historical introduction to cathedrals, before the voyage begins. At the end of the book, there are five pages of 'must-see items' (a round-up of Somerville's favourite cathedral treasures, 'intended for visitors in a hurry who want to cut to the chase') and a bibliography relating to the individual cathedrals, cathedral fiction and more general aspects of cathedrals.

Somerville's chosen cathedrals are acutely observed. The book is beautifully written and well worth reading. Much literature in the field of cathedral studies is written by cathedral 'insiders'; so, for a change, it is interesting to get an outsider's view of cathedral life.

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