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 ‘House’ of the Swedenborg Society, a body established in 1810 to translate, print, publish and sell the theological works of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). The Swedenborg Society was established as a publishing house and learned society, not as a confessional body, although members of the New Jerusalem, or New, Church founded in London in the late 1780s to further Swedenborg’s religious teachings, have always played a large part in its affairs. It was in this building in 1860 that there erupted a dispute that forms the subject matter of this paper. In 1854 a wealthy member of the Society’s committee, an Anglican curate without a cure of souls called the Revd Augustus Clissold (1797–1882),1 offered to make annual donations to the Society on condition that it would take premises to be used as a bookshop and library and as a centre of information for all matters relating to Swedenborg’s religious teachings.2 In reliance on that offer, in July 1854 the Society’s committee appointed a young Glaswegian general bookseller and publisher, William White (1831–1890), as the Society’s librarian, storekeeper and agent. It was a term of his appointment that he should occupy rent-free accommodation at the premises to be taken by the Society and that he should be allowed, in addition to selling the works of Swedenborg published by the Society, to ‘carry on a retail business in other new church works and general literature for his own benefit’.3 These words contained the seeds of the dispute that was to occur later. In June 1855 the Society purchased a lease of seventy-two years of the premises at no. 36 Bloomsbury Street for £1,450 (a sum contributed wholly by Augustus Clissold) at a ground rent of sixteen pounds and two shillings a year.4

In July 1860 it came to the notice of the committee of the Society that White had been selling at the Society’s bookshop, alongside the works of Swedenborg, contemporary works advocating Spiritualism and, in particular works by a certain Thomas Lake Harris. Harris (1823–1906) had been born in England, but had emigrated with his parents to the United States when he was five years old. Ordained as a Universalist minister in his early twenties, he had become by 1847 a follower of Andrew Jackson Davis of New York State who claimed to have received communications from the spirit of Emanuel Swedenborg. Breaking with Davis, Harris joined the New Jerusalem (i.e. Swedenborgian) Church, believing that Swedenborg had blessed him in a vision and that he ‘had

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1 Clissold had been curate of St Martin in the Fields and of St Mary’s, Stoke Newington. In 1835 he had married the rich heiress Eliza Crawshay and her estate, Newington Park, was renamed Clissold Park. After the deaths of the childless Clissolds the park and mansion were acquired for public use. Clissold Park is today owned and managed by the London Borough of Hackney.


3 These details are taken from the report of the case of Spurgin v. White [1860] Eng. R. 1302, heard by the Vice-Chancellor Sir John Stuart on 21 and 22 December 1860.

attained a revelatory level higher than Swedenborg’s’. He had set out these views in his book *Arcana of Christianity* (1858) and an appendix to this called (provocatively) *The Song of Satan* (1860). 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. He preached in the Steinway Hall, Wigmore Street where his listeners included the writer William Howitt (1792–1879), who described Harris’s extempore sermons as ‘...the only realisation of my conceptions of eloquence’. They were triumphant embodiments of sublime poetry, and a stern, unsparing, yet loving and burning theology.

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 the New Life in New York State with eventually disastrous results, Laurence having surrendered most of his property to Harris.

The Secretary of the Swedenborg Society was Garth Wilkinson’s younger brother William Martin Wilkinson (1814–1897), a solicitor practising from 44 Lincoln’s Inn Fields. Wilkinson was a keen spiritualist and for many years editor (with William Howitt) of the *Spiritual Magazine*. William and Elizabeth Wilkinson’s second son died in 1856 and this confirmed them in spiritualist beliefs which they found compatible with Swedenborg’s teachings about the next life. It has been remarked that they were members of a ‘loose grouping of middle-class intellectuals and professionals [who] became the early propagators of a particular brand of spiritualism’ that reflected their familiarity with Swedenborg’s writings.

While the Wilkinson brothers and White appeared to be at home with spiritualism and with the writing and preaching of Thomas Lake Harris, the majority of the committee of the Swedenborg

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7 William Howitt, originally a Quaker, left the Society of Friends in 1847 and afterwards became interested in Spiritualism. He was a prolific writer with many friends who included the Wilkinson brothers.


9 Ibid., p. 235.


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. 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. 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 Spelling Book, 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’. 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 would destroy his property and undo his work. He would no longer be an independent bookseller. He was, therefore, unable to comply with the terms of the resolution. On receipt of this letter the committee passed a further resolution giving White six months’ notice of dismissal, but this was withdrawn after White stated that he had removed all the offending literature and undertook not to sell any more so-called spiritualistic works.


14 The text of the resolution and all facts mentioned hereafter relating to the correspondence between the committee and White and the consequent court proceedings are (unless otherwise stated) taken from the very full report of *Spurgin v. White*, [1860] Eng. R., 1302, (1860) 2 Giff. 473 and (1860) 66 ER 198.
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 was alleged, fraudulently by the Secretary and the Treasurer, and instead took steps on the 8th November to dismiss Wilkinson as Secretary and replace him with Henry Butter. At the same meeting letters were handed to White dismissing him from his post as manager, storekeeper and agent and requiring him to give up possession of those parts of no. 36 Bloomsbury Street that he occupied as his residence. At this point the committee got possession of the premises by force, employing officers of the Society for the Suppression of Vice for the purpose, who seized £5,000 worth of White’s private book stock and closed the shop. That officers of a society more usually employed in suppressing pornographic literature emanating from Holywell Street should be used in these circumstances illustrates the dim view that the committee took of Harris’s books. This action enraged and disgusted White, Wilkinson and Fryer.

On the 26th November White obtained possession of the premises with the help of the well-known prize fighters Jem Mace and Jem Dillon, together with several of their associates. The story of the eviction of the officers of the Society for the Suppression of Vice is told in an amusing article, ‘How Jem Mace Became a Pillar of the Swedenborgian Church’, which appeared in The Reasoner for December 16, 1860. According to this account, White entered the premises and, after a conversational exchange, took one of the officers by the arm and ‘offered to introduce him to the fresh air’. This the officer declined. The article continues:

Whereupon Jem Mace, who was hovering about the door, seeking occasion to evince the reality of his attachment to the cause [ie the New Jerusalem], politely stepped in with his eight proselytes, and so effectually seconded Mr White’s operations, that three of the gentlemen in possession were plunged over head and ears into the atmospheric bath outside No.36, before they had time to comprehend the situation of affairs.

At this point, one of the four officers, who was armed with a cutlass, ran back into the building where he mounted a table and began to flourish his weapon in ‘a most repulsive and unfriendly

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15 The Society for the Suppression of Vice was founded in 1802. For an account of this society and its work, see Ben Wilson, The Making of Victorian Values: Decency and Dissent in Britain 1789-1837 (New York, The Penguin Press, 2007), chapter 4 ‘Reforming Saints’, pp. 117-39. The law report makes no mention of the presence of officers of this society at No. 36 Bloomsbury Street.

16 Holywell Street, which was demolished when the Aldwych was constructed, was notorious in the 19th century for its shops selling pornographic literature and prints. Early birth-control literature was sold by Holywell Street purveyors: see Michael Mason, The Making of Victorian Sexual Attitudes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 187.

17 In his Pastoral Letter to the Members of Swedenborg Society (1861) William Wilkinson makes clear his disgust at the employment by the majority of the Swedenborg Society’s committee of officers of the Society for the Suppression of Vice.

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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
and rolling up his sleeves, Mace walked up to the ‘astonished celestial’ standing on the table and,
putting his left arm behind him and his right hand on his breast, said to the officer of the Vice
Society, ‘just touch me here!’ After a passage of purple prose the article continues in this vein:

The celestial on the trencher evidently regarded Jem as an ugly customer, and foreseeing that, on
the first touch of his sword he should be doubled up and knocked into the smallest corner of
tomorrow, he faltered, and faltering was undone, and shortly found himself enjoying, outside the
house, the circumambient air with his late companions.

This entertaining, but no doubt highly partisan, article concludes like this:

We need scarcely add that, under the able ministry of Jem Mace and his faithful eight, the sale of
Swedenborg’s works has since gone on uninterruptedly, and in his absence Dillon, another
distinguished middle-weight, acts as true Gabriel of the Paradise at No.36.

But the triumph of William White and his prize-fighting friends was to be short-lived. Spurgin and
ten other members of the committee, four of them being also trustees of the Society’s property,
sought an injunction and other relief in the Court of Chancery against White, Wilkinson, Fryer and
nine or ten other members of the Society from disturbing their possession of the Society’s premises.
The pugilists, Jem Mace, Jem Dillon and their companions, were not joined as defendants. The case
was heard on 21 and 22 December 1860 and, after hearing counsel for both sides, Sir John Stuart
Vice-Chancellor granted the plaintiffs an interlocutory injunction restraining White from acting as
the Society’s agent or manager and from selling or advertising any books or periodicals from or at
the house of the society, and from disturbing or molesting the committee in their possession of the
property. The plaintiffs were to allow White to occupy rooms in the house as his residence for a
further two months, with the right of reasonable access to other rooms for the purpose of removing
his own stock and property. It should be emphasised that these were interlocutory or interim
proceedings pending the trial of the issues between the parties, and the plaintiffs gave the usual
undertaking in damages should White succeed at trial. No order was made against the other
defendants. The case of Spurgin v. White was reported in The Times on Monday 24 December 1860
and later in the law reports.

19 Charles Kingsley (1819–1875) was an Anglican clergyman and author of many novels, including The Water
Babies. He was, with his friend the Revd FD Maurice (1805–1872), known for his ‘Broad Church’ views and
espousal of ‘Christian Socialism’. It is interesting to note that there is a comment in the Swedenborg Society’s
Annual Report for 1859–1860 to the effect that those ‘seeking the establishment of…the Broad Church…’ were
taking truths to be found in Swedenborg’s writings. ‘Many of them will rather take to them from the writings
of such men as Maurice and Kingsley than from fountain-head [ie, Swedenborg]; but that need be no regret to
us, so long as they get them at all: Annual Report of the Swedenborg Society for 1859–1860, p. 24. William
Wilkinson, the Secretary, presumably drafted this.
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. 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.

The affair was the subject of an article in *The Saturday Review* for 12 January 1861 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 to have confused the Wilkinson brothers, quoting Emerson’s eulogy of Garth Wilkinson in his *English Traits* (1856). In fact, Garth Wilkinson played no part in the affair. By 1860 he was no longer a member of the Swedenborg Society’s committee and indeed was not even a member of the society. But the brothers were close and both were sympathetic to Harris and to spiritualism generally. On the narrow issue of the construction of White’s contract of employment with the society the writer thought that Wilkinson’s view would never be upheld by a Court of Equity, but on the wider issue of the compatibility of Swedenborgianism and Spiritualism he thought that there was ‘every possible resemblance and affinity between the two systems’ and mentioned the living writers, Emerson, George Bush, Howitt and [Garth] Wilkinson who had borne testimony to their intimate connection.

For the Swedenborg Society there was a return to ‘business as usual’. Its Annual Report for 1860–1861 states that ‘All opposition to the Society has now ceased, and all legal proceedings on both sides have been ordered to be withdrawn’. The committee had ‘sought to preserve the sacred principles and objects of the Society in troublous times, and have done it conscientiously…’. Special praise was given to the Society’s counsel and solicitor for the ‘judicious counsel, unwearied diligence and great care’ with which they had conducted the case. Leading counsel for the plaintiffs was Richard Malins, a Swedenborgian himself, who was later to become Vice-Chancellor of the Court of

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21 See the report of *White v. Bayley and others* in *The Observer*, 10 February 1861.

22 p. 39.


24 George Bush (1796–1859) was a Swedenborgian and Professor of Hebrew at the University of New York. He was the author of *Swedenborg and Mesmer; Or, the Relation of the Developments of Mesmerism to the Doctrines and Disclosures of Swedenborg* (1847). The former Presidents of the United States of this name are descended from his brother Timothy.

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.\footnote{26} 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.\footnote{27} Warren was Secretary of the Society for a few years before becoming a minister of the New Church in the USA. He compiled a \textit{Compendium} of Swedenborg’s writings which the American Swedenborg Foundation has recently reprinted.\footnote{28} Henry Butter succeeded him as Secretary, served for eight years and died in 1885 in his ninety-first year.\footnote{29}

William White took his revenge on the New Church in a biography of Swedenborg he published in 1867 in two volumes, with a one-volume revised edition appearing the following year.\footnote{30} While as a sympathetic, but critical, appraisal of Swedenborg the book still has its value, White was scathing about the members of the New Church whom he accused of being narrow-minded dogmatists who had taken over the running of the Swedenborg Society.\footnote{31} White was sufficiently highly-regarded by that most unorthodox student of Swedenborg, Henry James senior (a close friend of Garth Wilkinson), for the latter to have recommended his second son to call on him when in London. In a letter to his sister Alice dated 10 March 1869 Henry James junior describes a visit to White’s home in Hampstead in obedience to his father’s ‘injunction’. White gave the young man a tour of Hampstead, which he calls a ‘charming old town, nestling under oaks and ivied walls and sprawling over the deep misty verdure of its undulous heath’. White he describes as a ‘little short-legged Scot with a vast bald head, a broad brogue and a red face – a shrewd little North British vulgarian’.\footnote{32}

William Wilkinson had taken out Life Membership of the Swedenborg Society, but he took no further active part in its affairs. He did, however, attempt to justify his own part in the affair in a ‘Pastoral Letter to the Members of the Swedenborg Society’ which he circulated in May 1861. Like White, he


\footnote{27}\textit{Intellectual Repository and New Jerusalem Magazine}, vol. 13(ES), 1866, p. 236.

\footnote{28}Lines, ‘Edward Bayley: Swedenborgian Philanthropist’.

\footnote{29}West Chester PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2009. Warren’s \textit{Compendium} was first published in 1875.


\footnote{32}White reviews ‘The Progress of Swedenborgianism’ in the final chapter of both editions, chapter 36 (1867, vol.2) and chapter 46 (1868). The result of the Chancery case, he asserts, was ‘the transfer of the [Swedenborg] Society to the Conference Swedenborgians’, ie the General Conference of the New Church: 1867, vol. 2, p. 634.

directed his fire at the New Church members of the committee, particularly Bayley and Warren, accusing them of sectarian bigotry and narrowness. Wilkinson continued as editor (with William Howitt) of the *Spiritual Magazine* for many years. He was a founder of the Charity Organization Society, established in 1869 to address the causes of poverty by applying scientific principles to philanthropy. In fact, his obituary in *The Times* (22 June 1897), which makes no mention of his eighteen years as Secretary of the Swedenborg Society, states that ‘he may be considered [the Charity Organization] Society’s actual founder or inventor’. Garth Wilkinson returned to the Swedenborg Society after many years, becoming its Chairman for the year 1882–1883 and being regarded as the *doyen* of Swedenborgianism in late Victorian London, although he never joined the organised New Church, but remained a member of the Church of England.

34 A leading member of the Charity Organization Society was the housing reformer Octavia Hill: see Gillian Darley, *Octavia Hill: Social reformer and founder of the National Trust* (London: Francis Boutle, 2010), chapter 7, pp. 111-126. Darley makes no mention at all of William Wilkinson. Darley’s biography was originally published by Constable in 1990. Octavia Hill was a close friend of William and Mary Howitt.