# "Then keep the antient way": Henry Vaughan and the Survival of Anglicanism

**By Robert Wilcher**

Henry Vaughan was born in 1621 in the Usk valley, where—apart from three or four years studying at Oxford and the Inns of Court in London—he spent most of his life. While he was in London, the so-called Long Parliament met for the first time on November 3rd 1640 and he witnessed the beginnings of the revolution that would lead to the abolition of both the Church of England and the monarchy. His father recalled him to Breconshire at the outbreak of civil war and in 1645 he served as a lieutenant in a Royalist troop of horse at the Battle of Rowton Heath near Chester, in which the king's forces were defeated. He later published elegies on a friend lost in that battle and another killed at the siege of Pontefract Castle early in 1649.

The poet suffered an even greater loss in July 1648, when his younger brother, William, died as a result of fighting for the royal cause. These deaths, the military defeat of the royalist cause, and the execution of Charles I in January 1649—together with the poetry and personal example of George Herbert—transformed Henry Vaughan (not yet thirty years old) from a writer of Cavalier verses into a devotional poet of the first order and an unflinching opponent of the Puritan regime imposed upon South Wales. During this period of defeat and bereavement, Vaughan was composing the poems that were assembled in his 1650 volume, *Silex Scintillans*.

The first of them, "Regeneration", records his experience of awakening to sin and setting out on a spiritual pilgrimage. In the poems that followed he developed imagery that caught the mood of many of his compatriots, who were living like him in "*a gloomie sphere, / Where shadowes thicken, and the Cloud / Sits on the Suns brow all the yeare*".[1] "The Lampe" evokes the "dead night round about" and the flame that briefly lights up "the dark world" is read as an emblem of the poet's longing for an end to his misery: "*I watch / That houre, which must thy life, and mine dispatch.*" In the second of several elegies for his brother, he appeals to Christ for relief from the slow-moving hours of mourning:

*Come, come, what doe I here?*
*Since he is gone*
*Each day is grown a dozen year,*
*And each hour one;*
*Come, come!*
*Cut off the sum . . .*

Such a longing for death comes from despair of any alleviation of his misery in this world.

Another resource is to anticipate an end to hopeless grief not merely in personal death but in "*the end of all things*". "Buriall", for example, implores a halt to the wearisome accumulation of days: "*Cutt then the summe, / Lord haste, Lord*

*come, / O come Lord Jesus quickly*!" This apocalyptic solution is given a political dimension in "The Brittish Church". He imagines the Church—traditionally interpreted as the spouse of Christ—begging her "glorious head" to return and save her from the brutality of men whose behaviour brings to mind those who crucified Christ. While "these here"—the Puritan oppressors—"their *mists*, and *shadows* hatch", their military agents "divide, and stain" what George Herbert had called the "fit aray" of the Church of England. In the second stanza, the ravished Church pleads that Christ will keep a record of the crimes committed against her and her persecuted flock and return quickly to administer justice. This desperate belief that the Second Coming is the only remedy for the historical plight of loyal members of the Church of England is distilled into four lines in the poem "Corruption":

*All's in deep sleep, and night; Thick darknes lyes*
*And hatcheth o'r thy people;*
*But hark! what trumpet's that? what Angel cries*
*Arise! Thrust in thy sickle*.

Before the end of the 1650 volume, however, Vaughan begins to recover a sense of personal agency and historical purpose. The turning-point comes when he takes up a challenge issued by Herbert, whose poetry was widely revered as a definitive expression of the spirit of Anglicanism. Describing one of his poems as a "speciall deed", in which he dedicates his life and talent to the divine "will", Herbert looks forward to a poetic successor – "some kind man" who will not only "*set his hand / And heart unto this deed, when he hath read*", but "*thrust his heart / Into these lines*".[2] In "The Match", Vaughan makes an impassioned response both to the role that Herbert's poetry had played in his own spiritual regeneration and to this invitation:

*Dear friend! whose holy, ever-living lines*
*Have done much good*
*To many, and have checkt my blood,*
*My fierce, wild blood that still heaves, and inclines,*
*But is still tam'd*
*By those bright fires which thee inflam'd;*
*Here I join hands, and thrust my stubborn heart*
*Into thy Deed,*
*There from no Duties to be freed . . .*

As part of his new public task of carrying Herbert's work over into the next generation, he calls upon those who have been languishing like him in the depths of depression to assert their religious allegiance. The poem is appropriately called "*Easter-day": "Awake, awake; and like the Sun, disperse / All mists that would usurp this day*." And in "The Mutinie", speaking like an ancient Israelite in bondage to

Babylonian overlords, he urges God to grant him a more active part in resisting the common enemy:

*Let me so strive and struggle with thy foes*
*(Not thine alone, but mine too,) that when all*
*Their Arts and force are built unto the height*
*That Babel-weight*
*May prove thy glory, and their shame*.

Later poems in the 1650 volume entertain the thought that the nation's problems may be resolved as part of the historical process rather than at the end of time. "The Constellation" vividly evokes the horrors of civil war, in which both King and Church are victims of the "black self-wil" of Puritan fanatics: "*The sons the father kil, / The Children chase the mother, and would heal / The wounds they give, by crying, zeale*." But in the final verse, Vaughan looks to a better future:

*Give to thy spouse her perfect, and pure dress,*
*Beauty and holiness,*
*And so repair these Rents, that men may see*
*And say, Where God is, all agree*.

At this juncture, we need to pause for a moment to look at the situation of loyal members of the Church of England in Britain, and more specifically in Vaughan's part of Wales, in 1650. The institution that had emerged in the reign of Edward VI and been established by the Elizabethan Settlement in 1559 was more liturgical than theological in emphasis. Its Protestant assurance was grounded in a life of worship made possible by the Book of Common Prayer and the Bible in English; and it had placed at the centre of its agenda the project of building up a Christian commonwealth through corporate worship.[3]

As an adolescent, Vaughan had participated in this tradition; and when he went to Oxford, at the end of the 1630s, he would have encountered the kind of Anglicanism that had been promoted by William Laud, who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633. Laud sought to restore the order and beauty of pre-Reformation services as far as was compatible with the patterns of worship enjoined by the 1559 Book of Common Prayer; and Francis Mansell, the Master of Jesus College during Vaughan's residence, was committed to carrying through a programme of reform. In 1636, the chapel had been enlarged and embellished, and the services experienced by the young student from Breconshire would have been highly ceremonial.[4] A critic has imagined how, in the course of the 1640s, Vaughan must have "watched with horror the gradual extinction of the earthly manifestations of Laudian Anglicanism".[5]

The Parliament at Westminster, dominated by Puritans who regarded Laud's reforms as tantamount to a reversion to Roman Catholicism, passed a series of measures that systematically dismantled the established Church of England. The use of the Book of Common Prayer was forbidden, either in church or in private; the

observance of the feasts of Christmas, Easter, and Whitsun was banned; crucifixes, fonts, and vestments were removed from churches; altars were replaced by tables; and in 1646, the office of bishop was abolished. Once the king had lost the civil war and then his head, there was little that could be done in the open to preserve the Church of England. But there was a clandestine movement of what has been called “Anglican Survivalism”, inspired by Henry Hammond, former chaplain to Charles I, and spearheaded by a group of younger controversialists, who were to hold high ecclesiastical office after the restoration of the monarchy and the Church of England in 1660.[6] These active opponents of Puritan reforms, several of whom had taken refuge in Wales, used the printing press to mount “a wide-ranging and resolute defence of the pre-1640 Church of England”.[7]

Hammond was well aware, however, that the survival of Anglicanism would depend upon something more fundamental than the continuity of its clergy and the vigour of its apologists. In 1654, he wrote that “unless some care be taken otherwise to maintain the Communion of our Church, it is to little purpose what any write in defence of it”.[8] At the same time, Bishop Joseph Hall urged “orthodox and genuine sons of the Church of England” to enter into a ‘*Holy Fraternity of Mourners in Sion*’, whose “private Devotions” would hold the community together in the absence of opportunities for regular communal worship.[9] It was precisely on this issue—how to succour the faithful remnant of Anglicans and maintain its spiritual identity in a time of persecution—that Henry Vaughan’s endeavours as a writer in the first half of the 1650s were concentrated. And the local situation he found himself in at this time made this task even more pressing.

On 22 February 1650, An Act for the Better Propagation and Preaching of the Gospel in Wales was passed at Westminster. Under its terms, a group of local commissioners were empowered to remove clergy from their parishes. As a result, two hundred and seventy-five ejections took place across Wales, of which twenty-five were in Breconshire alone. Among them, Vaughan’s twin brother was evicted from the local church of Llansantffraed and a close friend, Thomas Powell, from the nearby parish of Cantref for “Adhering to the King, and Reading Common Prayer”.[10] Until suitable candidates could be found to fill the empty places, itinerant preachers were drafted in. In practice, however, almost every church within walking distance of Llansantffraed remained closed throughout the 1650s.[11] After the publication of the 1650 *Silex Scintillans*, then, Vaughan deemed it his duty – as the self-appointed successor to George Herbert – to devote his literary talents to keeping alive a sense of Anglican communion in the absence of services according to the traditional liturgy.

While new poems that would serve this purpose were accumulating, Vaughan made a contribution to the project of Anglican survival in a collection of prose meditations and prayers entitled *The Mount of Olives*, which was printed in 1652. The subtitle he chose for the work – “Solitary Devotions” – acknowledges that

communal worship can no longer take place in "sacred buildings" and that "the Church" must now subsist primarily in the hearts of those who remain loyal to the tradition embodied in the Prayer Book.  The work is, in effect, an alternative to the outlawed liturgy for private devotional use by Bishop Hall's "Holy Fraternity of Mourners in Sion".  In a dedicatory epistle, Vaughan recalls that there is divine precedent for the exile of good men from the comforts of a house of their own:  "The *Sonne* of *God* himselfe (when *he* was *here*,) had no place to put his head in; And his *Servants* must not think the *present measure* too hard, seeing their *Master* himself took up his *nights-lodging* in the cold *Mount* of *Olives*."  In the body of the work, a prayer in time of persecution spells out the consequences of Parliament's religious policy in South Wales:

*The wayes of Zion do mourne, our beautiful gates are shut up, and the Comforter    that should relieve our souls is gone far from us.  Thy Service and thy Sabbaths, thy own sacred Institutions and the pledges of thy love are denied unto us; Thy ministers are trodden down, and the basest of the people are set up in thy holy place.*

In a *short Exhortation* to the "pious Reader" he draws upon insights gained during his own struggle with despair:  "*Think not that thou art alone upon this Hill, there is an innumerable company both before and behinde thee.  Those with their Palms in their hands, and these expecting them".*  The sense of isolation that might weaken Anglican resolve is countered with a reminder that the Church at its most fundamental is neither a building nor an institution but the "*innumerable company"* (in this world and the next) that makes up the living Body of Christ.

Asserting the validity of the liturgical calendar that had governed worship in the Church of England, Vaughan opens the new collection of poems added to *Silex Scintillans* in 1655 with "Ascension-day" and "Ascension-Hymn", and follows these at intervals with "White Sunday", "Palm-Sunday", and "Trinity-Sunday".  Throughout the 1650 and 1655 collections he condemns the Puritan legislators for attempting to eradicate features of Anglican communal worship.  In "Christs Nativity", he angrily resents the prohibition of Christmas celebrations – "*Alas, my God! Thy birth now here / Must not be numbred in the year*"; and in "Dressing", he insists on imagining the reception of the "mysticall *Communion"* of the Eucharist – denied him according to the traditional rite – with reverential gestures that are no longer countenanced by the law:  "*Then kneel my soul, and body; kneel, and bow; / If Saints, and Angels fal down, much more thou*."

The Prayer Book services of Matins and Evensong are replaced by poems with titles that indicate private devotion rather than shared worship: "The Morning-Watch" and "The Evening-Watch".  In the first of these, he participates with the whole of the natural world in a tribute of praise, in defiance of Puritan efforts to suppress such ritual adoration:

*. . . hark!  In what rings,*
*And hymning circulations the quick world*
*Awakes, and sings;*
*The rising winds,*
*And falling springs,*
*Birds, beasts, all things*
*Adore him in their kinds.*
*Thus all is hurled*
*In sacred hymns, and order, the great chime*
*And symphony of nature.*

And in "The Bird", the dawn chorus provides faithful members of the Church of England with a natural substitute for the Prayer Book service of morning worship, which is in sharp contrast to the gloomy practices of the regime that has banned its use.

The contemplation of the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost reinforces the poet's determination to defend his vision of the true church against the "distractions" of Puritan pretensions to divine authority.  Many of the radical preachers claimed that they were illuminated by the same spiritual fire that had enabled the Apostles "to speak with other tongues" (Acts 2:1-4).  In "White Sunday", Vaughan dismisses the vain boasts of such men and turns to the Bible as the surest source of inspiration and truth:

*Can these new lights be like to those,*
*These lights of Serpents like the Dove?*
*Thou hadst no gall, ev'n for thy foes,*
*And thy two wings were Grief and Love.*

*Though then some boast that fire each day,*
*And on Christs coat pin all their shreds;*
*Not sparing openly to say,*
*His candle shines upon their heads:*

*Yet while some rays of that great light*
*Shine here below within thy Book,*
*They never shall so blind my sight*
*But I will know which way to look.*

He directs his mockery at a particular dissenting group known as the "New Lights" that had gathered around Morgan Llwyd in Wrexham during the late 1640s.  Llwyd became one of the itinerant preachers entrusted with the task of spreading the Gospel in Wales, who arrogated to themselves the divine favour granted to Job, when "his candle shined upon my head" (Job, 29:3).

Overtures were made to Vaughan by the victorious party, but unlike others in his local community, he would not forsake his political or religious allegiances. His refusal to collaborate with the Brecon authorities is expressed in a number of poems, most powerfully in *The Proffer*, which opens with a stern rebuke – "*Be still black Parasites, / Flutter no more"* –and contemptuously rejects their "*Sorcery / And smooth seducements*": *"I'le not stuff my story / With your Commonwealth and glory*". In his *private* capacity, he will sacrifice neither his support for monarchy nor his hope for the crown of immortality that awaits the faithful soul:

*Shall my short hour, my inch,*
*My one poor sand,*
*And crum of life, now ready to disband*
*Revolt and flinch,*
*And having born the burden all the day,*
*Now cast at night my Crown away?*

And in the final stanza, he assumes his *public* role as the champion of persecuted Anglicanism as he admonishes and encourages others in the same predicament as himself:

*Then keep the antient way!*
*Spit out their phlegm*
*And fill thy brest with home; think on thy dream:*
*A calm, bright day!*
*A Land of flowers and spices! the word given,*
*If these be fair, O what is Heaven!*

Although the Propagation Act lapsed early in 1653 and Oliver Cromwell put in place less extreme policies for Wales when he became Protector in December of that year, Vaughan never accepted the new order of things. The preface to the augmented *Silex Scintillans*, dated 30 September 1654, dedicated the poems pointedly "to the *Church*, under the *protection* and *conduct* of her *glorious Head*." That head was, of course, ultimately Christ, whose Second Coming was Vaughan's surest hope for peace and justice; but in the context of history, the head of the Church of England was now Charles II, in exile over the water, but ready – when the time was right – to return to England and restore the outlawed church as well as his own kingdom. The volume ends with an appeal to God for a future dispensation in which the people will be "*like true sheep, all in one fold*" and blessings will flow "*as fast, as persecutions now*":

*So shall we know in war and peace*
*Thy service to be our sole ease,*
*With prostrate souls adoring thee,*
*Who turn'd our sad captivity!*

*Dr Robert Wilcher is an honorary fellow of the Shakespeare Institute, Stratford-upon-Avon. He is one of the editors of a new complete works of Henry Vaughan which will be published by Oxford University Press next summer.*

---

**Notes**

[1] 'Death. *A Dialogue*'. All examples of Vaughan's poetry and prose are quoted from *The Works of Henry Vaughan*, edited by L.C. Martin, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957).

[2] See 'Obedience', in *The English Poems of George Herbert*, edited by Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 374-5.

[3] This account is derived from John Wall's book, *Transformations of the Word: Spenser, Herbert, Vaughan* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988), pp. 1-6.

[4] See Graham Parry, 'Vaughan and Laudianism', *Scintilla*, 13 (2009), pp 186-7.

[5] Leah S. Marcus, *Childhood and Cultural Despair* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978), p. 171.

[6] The term was given currency by John Morrill in 'The Church in England, 1642-9', in *Reactions to the English Civil War 1642-1649*, edited by John Morrill (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 89-90.

[7] See John Spurr, *The Restoration Church of England, 1646-1689* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 11.

[8] Quoted by John W. Packer, *The Transformation of Anglicanism 1643-1660* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969), p. 46.

[9] Joseph Hall, *The Holy Order, Or, Fraternity of Mourners in Sion* (London, 1654), pp. 3-5.

[10] Quoted by F.E. Hutchinson, *Henry Vaughan: A Life and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), p. 110.

[11] See Noel K. Thomas, *Henry Vaughan: Poet of Revelation* (Worthing: Churchman Publishing, 1986), p. 35.