

JULIAN CRITCHLEY remembers Dick Royds, sometime Vicar of Clunbury, one of A. E. Housman's four 'quietest places'

## A cleric with ambition firmly held in check

"CLUNTON, Clunbury, Clungunford and Clun" are, as we all know, "the quietest places under the sun". I think Housman would have approved of Dick Royds, who for nearly 20 years, from 1955, was Vicar of Clunbury, the prettiest of the quartet. Housman would not have shared Royds's religious beliefs, but would have admired his humour and command of the English language.

In a letter to a friend, Richard Hill, Rector of Bromyard in Herefordshire, Royds himself appears to have had no great opinion of his qualities. "I am a negligible scholar. I am an incoherent preacher. I am a futile administrator," he wrote. What was more, he continued, "I do not give wine-and-cheese parties in the nave of my church. I do not even serve Bovril and biscuits in the vestry. But I am a fanatical Evangelical and Erastian half crazy with ambition." His ambition was to become the Rural Dean of Clun.

Dick Royds was tall and portly, with a large expanse of waistcoat and a heavy double chin, and he walked with rather a slow, stiff gait. He seldom wore a clerical collar but, instead, a soft collar and white tie, after the old-fashioned Evangelical custom. He played the piano well, and he had a light tenor voice, so that he was often in demand both as a soloist and a choral singer.

Sadly, he never became Rural Dean; but it probably gave him even greater satisfaction to be appointed a Prebendary of Hereford Cathedral. Many of his contemporaries at Westcott House had become bishops, and he enjoyed describing his tours from palace to palace when on

holiday, and the solicitous hospitality with which he was everywhere received. He had a gift for the curiously apt phrase, as when he compared Dean Burrows of Hereford to "a lily in a dry vase".

EXTRACTS from his long correspondence with Richard Hill give the flavour of the man. Take, for example, this description of a luncheon party while on holiday:

"The Bishop, who was also at the lunch party — as idle and urbane as ever — shares my dislike of the word 'challenge'. He wore a purple tie. The Archdeacon wore a white, sailor-knot tie, knitted by his daughter under my influence (according to her father, which may be true, as I tip her rather heavily), and we were altogether a gay party, inert but bizarre, cynical yet godly . . .

"I had a week of slobbering and fawning and gulping and spluttering and oceans of swooningly sweet white wine. Snivelling and intemperance are my two favourite hobbies, and, among other people, I stayed with the chairman of Scottish and Newcastle Breweries who, in his exalted position, is able reverently to procure a few bottles of the sweetest port ever shipped, as well as the best years' Sauterne."

Or this written during a convalescence:

"Two or three days later, I wrote to the nice rich Jew who took me to Glyndeboune in July and told him that as the 'County' had been more than kind, and my parishioners consistently sweet the whole time, all I now wanted was a kind enquiry from the powerful industrial middle



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classes. Instantly, a supremely slushy letter arrived from a wealthy paint manufacturer in the North, at the wedding of whose daughter (and only child) I should have been officiating if I had been able to . . .

"Meanwhile I am attended with the utmost solicitude by my doctor (this year's Mayor of Bishop's Castle), an elderly physiotherapist at Church Stretton and a retired eye-surgeon, because one of my eyes is rather badly affected. All are singularly godly, my doctor being the son of a deceased rural dean in Cambridgeshire, my physiotherapist the son of a Kentish rector who is also one of those mysterious six preachers of Canterbury Cathedral, and the eye-surgeon one of my sidesmen at Hopesay. All these staunch upholders of the Established Church insist that I

should rest, and you would think that with my horror of 'doing things', my rugged scorn of all activity, and my almost intemperate passion for inertia, their instructions would be easily obeyed; but I now find that I am credited with a wild dynamic energy, which none can restrain."

Dick Royds was no "modern" parson for whom spiritual well-being may have given way to welfare. His views were staunchly conservative. On one occasion he wrote to Hill: "If the parish is so fantastically conservative, surely they would have done better to appoint me to the benefice? For in the words of the 81st Psalm 'I should soon have put down their enemies', and I should ruthlessly have stamped out all enthusiasm, progress and initiative. No original thought or bright idea would have

been allowed to pollute my tranquil incumbency and I doubt if the Parochial Church Council would have ever met. They would have received neither strong meat nor milk from me, but a kind of indeterminate theological custard, wholly uncontaminated by 'enthusiasm'."

Royds's social ambition ranged beyond the epicurean comforts of a bishop's palace. "I am in excellent health," he wrote, "and pursuing with gay serenity my vile career of odious chicanery and squalid intrigue. I have just written a servile and oleaginous letter to the second Mrs R. A. Butler (a distant cousin) congratulating her upon her husband's appointment to the mastership of my old college and, of course, hoping for an invitation to the Master's Lodge. When I am dead, I want it to be said that there was no place of importance which had not to be etiolated by my vapid simperings or distraught with my inane guffaws."

Dick Royds enjoyed representing himself to be an absurd, futile figure: a survivor from a past age, completely out of sympathy with all modern movements, unable to understand young people and helpless when confronted with modern technology in any form.

Needless to say, his self-denigration was quite unjustified. He may indeed have been baffled by machinery and preferred what was traditional to what was new, but young people found him an intriguing and attractive character. In his parish of Clunbury he was held in great affection as a pastor who knew all his people and cared for them.

He never married. In 1974 a second stroke brought his life to a premature end. His funeral service was of course that provided in the Book of Common Prayer, and on the service cards was printed a message from him thanking the congregation for their attendance. *Julian Critchley is the Conservative MP for Aldershot.*