



‘John Bunyan: Texts, Contexts, Reception’ –Fourth Triennial Conference of The International John Bunyan Society, The Open University and De Montfort University, Bedford, 1-5 September 2004.

At the fourth International John Bunyan Society Conference, hosted jointly by the Open and De Montfort Universities in Bedford, September 2004, scholars were invited to recognise and celebrate, as well as to question and debate, the ‘afterlife’ of John Bunyan: the Bedfordshire preacher and the active Dissenter, the ‘Englishman’ and the transnational author, the local historical figure and the cultural icon. In this, ‘John Bunyan: Texts, Contexts, Reception’ was a remarkable event, gathering an international cohort of contributors to consider issues ranging from the translation and illustration of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, in cultures and contexts very different from Bunyan’s own, to the lasting and profound significance of Bunyan’s books for numerous writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as for poets, novelists, dramatists, and film makers of the twentieth. How and why Bunyan has lived on, and is living still, in the works and minds of writers and readers alike was the deep focus of this conference. As such, it resulted in one of the richest and most engaging series of papers and lectures so far organised by the International John Bunyan Society.

Proceedings opened with an address from Terry Waite, who told the extraordinary story of how, when held as a hostage in Beirut during the 1980s, he received a postcard of Bunyan sent to him by a local Bedfordshire woman, Joy Brodier. Underscoring the importance of remembering Bunyan and, in Waite’s case, of remembering others by him, this famous anecdote struck something of a keynote. For in Waite’s miraculous encounter with that postcard lies a narrative of memory and connection, of personal lives and hard political circumstance, which was subsequently reflected, albeit in different ways, in the accounts delivered by each of the plenary speakers. In ‘The Portable Bunyan’, Isabel Hofmeyr (University of Witwatersrand) presented a ‘transnational history’ of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, tackling the complex transmission and translation of Bunyan’s most famous book within some specific African contexts. The story of how Africans owned, adapted, and adopted the ‘Portable Bunyan’, in various ways, languages and cultures, is one which Hofmeyr engagingly recounted. Vincent Newey (University of Leicester) offered four ‘case studies’ in ‘Bunyan’s Afterlife’, illustrating the endurance of Bunyan within English literary history and elsewhere. Deftly moving between Bunyan’s place in the poetry and prose of William Cowper, and in the fiction of George Eliot and Mark Rutherford (William Hale White) too, Professor Newey closed his lucid literary commentary, both sensitive and sensible by turns, by pointing towards an entirely new connection: between Bunyan’s configurations of identity

and 'rebirth' and their place in an inherited Puritan imagination, as evinced by the Hollywood movie *Seconds* (John Frankenheimer, 1966, US).

Gary Day (De Montfort University) and Tom Paulin (Hertford College, Oxford) found other routes around Bunyan's texts and contexts in their plenary sessions. Day focused on the ongoing story of 'Bunyan and Englishness', confronting Bunyan's disappearance from an already 'dismantled' Leavisite literary tradition, on the one hand, and his awkward place within other traditions of 'Englishness' (spiritual, political, cultural), on the other. Bunyan's 'Englishness' was finally located in a rhetoric which, Day argued, has helped to shape the modern culture of work via the 'monetary idiom' of Bunyan's religious language. In this way, Day conjured a Bunyan valuable for the ways in which his writings construct a culture of exchange, and which also speak to a religion of 'work'. In 'Bunyan Now', Tom Paulin returned to the physicality of Bunyan's prose and its impressively 'tactile quality' in order to champion Bunyan as a writer sensitive to the power of the English language, and also as an astute political figure, ever attuned to and yet never fearful of challenging oppression and injustice. Bunyan is to be reckoned with as such 'now', Paulin suggested, if his radical legacy of Dissent is to be rescued from becoming complacently erased both in and by current scholarship. The final plenary lecture, Vera Camden's 'Young Man Bunyan', focused upon Bunyan's life and mind, and in particular upon Bunyan's development and 'coming of age' during the English Civil Wars. Tracing connections between the young and mature Bunyan, and also between the shaping of psychology and traumatic historical events, Professor Camden's approach explored the complexities involved in mapping Bunyan's youthful military identity onto his later dissenting self.

The conference's thirteen panels of individual papers (delivered in parallel sessions) complemented the five plenary lectures, by addressing in compelling ways the reception, translation and adaptation of Bunyan's writings over the last three hundred years. Nathalie Collé-Bak (Université Nancy 2), in 'The Illustrations of *The Pilgrim's Progress*', elucidated the translation of Bunyan's words into pictures in nineteenth-century editions of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, revealing how these images were for many readers as important as the text itself, and how Bunyan's book came to accrue a crucially 'iconographic' status. Robert Collmer (Baylor University) and Galen Johnson (John Brown University), by contrast, dealt with very different kinds of translation. In 'Bunyan among the Non-Dissenters', Collmer examined some fascinating French Roman Catholic adaptations of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, while Johnson's 'Of Bowels and Bigotry' considered John Wesley's corrective editions of Bunyan's fictions via the 'dyspeptic tensions' that Wesley sought to ease within them, theologically and pastorally. Among the many other contributions, any of which would serve to indicate this conference's tremendous range and variety of interests, included Julie Campbell's (University of Southampton) reading of Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* as a twentieth-century reworking of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Chris Garrett's (Texas A&M University) refreshing series of enquiries into T.S.'s spurious Second Part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, alongside some thoroughly absorbing reassessments of *The Holy War*, in the Restoration contexts of Nonconformist prayer and dissent, proposed respectively by David Gay (University of Alberta) and Katsuhiko Engestsu (Doshisha University).

Amid this programme of intense academic activity, space was given to other events too, and full advantage was taken of the conference's Bunyan-based location. Delegates were given a choice of guided outings, to museums in Bedford (which included visits to the Bunyan Meeting and to Bedford Central Library, where a display of rare books from its Special Collections archive had been arranged), and to museums further afield, in the outlying

villages of Elstow and Stevington. An evening of seventeenth-century popular tunes performed by Jeremy Barlow's 'Broadside Band' was a particular highlight, not least because it afforded over two hours of wonderful music (as well as some dancing) in Bedford's impressive Corn Exchange, but also because two of Bunyan's own songs ('Of the Rose-bush' and 'Of the Child with the Bird at the Bush') were aired too, possibly for the first time in over three centuries, having been set to an authentic score. Professor Bob Owens (Open University), the outgoing Society President, is owed thanks for arranging this unique musical opportunity. The conference closed on a more sober note. A Society business meeting was held on the last day, dedicated to recording a formal tribute to the late Professor Richard L. Greaves, whose presence within the life of the Society, and indeed throughout Bunyan scholarship, will, without doubt, continue to be felt for many years to come.

Michael Davies University of Liverpool