

Two Accounts of the Death of Dr. Peter Vaughan, Warden of Merton College

By J. R. L. HIGHFIELD

ON Wednesday 12 July 1826, 'The Reverend Peter Vaughan, D.D., Warden of Merton College departed this life at ten o'clock at night in his lodgings. And was interred on Wednesday 19th inst. at six o'clock in the evng. in the College Chapel; the Society then resident, attending the funeral.'¹ Thus the Sub-Warden, the Reverend Moses Edward Griffith, as he entered up the official account of the death of Warden Vaughan in the College Register. Peter Vaughan, whose father was a successful physician in practice at Leicester,² had gone to Merton—an Oxford College with Leicestershire lands—in 1787 at the age of seventeen. A Postmaster of the College, he had won the Chancellor's Latin Verse prize and, on graduation, had become an assistant master at Rugby; but he soon returned to Merton as Fellow.³ He served the University as Proctor in 1805 and his College as Tutor in the following year. Having proceeded to the degrees of B.D. and D.D., he became Warden when Warden Scrope Berdmore resigned in 1810. A crayon drawing by Lewis Vaslet, dated 1790, now in the Warden's Lodgings, may represent him but the attribution is uncertain.⁴

The sixteen years of Warden Vaughan's rule were not notable although it fell to him to entertain Tsar Nicholas I and the Duchess of Oldenburg in 1814 at the time of the visit of the Allied Sovereigns to Oxford, and it was under him that Hartley Coleridge came up as a Postmaster (1815);⁵ and in 1821 Vaughan himself acted as pro-Vice-Chancellor. But if G. V. Cox is to be believed he held the reins of his College loosely. 'Things were lax enough at Merton in his (Scrope Berdmore's) days, but they became worse in those of his successor, Dr Vaughan. The ghost of Walter de Merton might well be said to have appeared in the College; . . .'⁶ The official account of the Warden's death was decently reticent. Some three months after it was written a fuller story was recorded when the Warden's youngest brother, the Reverend Edward Thomas Vaughan, since 1802 Vicar of St. Martin's and of All

¹ Merton College Register 1:5, p. 35. For the inscription on his gravestone, and the memorial slab erected by Sir Charles Vaughan see A. J. Bott, *The Monuments in Merton College Chapel* (1964), 44, 68.

² The family was West Country in origin, cf. E. G. W. Bill, *University Reform in Nineteenth Century Oxford* (1973), 4.

³ For his academic career see Joseph Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses, 1715-1885*. He was the fourth son of James Vaughan, M.D., doctor of Leicester and Hester, daughter of Alderman Smalley of that city (Bill, *op. cit.*, 4).

⁴ Mrs. R. Lane Poole, *Catalogue of Oxford Portraits*, Oxford Hist. Soc., LXXXI (1926), ii, no. 40, 56.

⁵ Herbert Hartman, *Hartley Coleridge, Poet's Son and Poet* (1931), 61.

⁶ G. V. Cox, *Recollections of Oxford* (1868), 168.

Saints, Leicester,⁷ wrote to another brother of the dead Warden, Sir Charles Richard Vaughan, sometime Fellow of All Souls, and from 1825 British envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to the United States.⁸ His letter has survived among the Vaughan papers at All Souls.⁹

' My Dearest Brother,¹⁰

your second letter received before I have answered the first has been very disturbing to me. My design has been to write to you day after day and week after week till one engagement in succession to another has dragged me into months of silence and neglect. I find it to be one of the evils arising from a desire to write a letter which I think may be worth carriage across the Atlantic, that I write none : if I could make up my mind to a short one, I should write more steadily . . .

Before this time, you will have received the melancholy announcement of poor dear Peter's death ; an event which has been a source of real grief and deep distress to me. Whilst (p. 1 v) I cannot help throwing some blame upon others, I throw still more upon myself. Almeria¹¹ ought to have written me explicitly what his state was instead of dealing in dark inuendos and deferring all explanations till the Serjeant¹² should see me at the assizes. I assure you most honestly, that although I *suspected* there might be something wrong in his domestic arrangements, I a little doubted whether it might not be a dose of laudanum taken in a fit of melancholy and despair to which she alluded when (and *crossed out*) she spoke of his sin rather than this abominable sort of connection. The Serjeant too, who was privy to the whole affair from the year 1814 and who had seen the woman in his lodgings two months before his death, ought surely to have apprized me what had been going on and what his state during those last few weeks of his life had notoriously been. But still I have myself chiefly to blame that I did not demand a full disclosure of the affair which was so darkly intimated and force myself upon him as a faithful witness to wash him of his evil and insist upon his dismissal of his concubine. I believe he would heartily have thanked me for doing so, for I cannot but think that he had conscience enough to render him wretched in the extreme and that he wanted firmness chiefly to rid himself of his shame and torment . . . I believe he would have welcomed me as an angel of light. Instead of which, though I most distinctly said in more letters than one to Almeria that I was ready at a moment's warning to fly to him whenever he would see me—I seem to have been the only person studiously kept in ignorance of his state and it was left to his (2 r) last articulation to cry for me ; which I understand that *he did very vehemently*. Now what can be more distressing than all this? Can you figure a death-bed scene to yourself more horrid—the case being rendered doubly so by the circumstance of his office—a dignitary of the Church—can you conceive any thing more horrid than his very last breath being drawn with this woman in his room disturbed by her falling down on the floor of his chamber with a loud shriek. Yet this, I understand from Almeria was the real close of his life ; the woman

⁷ He was the seventh son of James Vaughan, born probably in 1776 (Vaughan Papers, All Souls College). He matriculated at Cambridge in 1792 (Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses*, pt. 2, 1752–1900, vi, 279). He had become vicar of St. Martin's and of All Saints, Leicester in 1802 and rector of Foston, Leics., in 1812 (*Ibid.*).^{*} I have been helped with notes marked * by Mr. J. S. G. Simmons, the Librarian of the Codrington Library.

⁸ He was the sixth son of Dr. Vaughan. Born in 1774 he had gone up to Merton in 1791. He had become a Fellow of All Souls in 1798, Radcliffe Travelling Fellow in 1800, private secretary to Henry Bathurst, 3rd Earl Bathurst, Secretary for Foreign Affairs in 1809 (Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses* and *Dictionary of National Biography*).

⁹ Vaughan Papers (D), All Souls College. The existence of this letter was kindly drawn to my attention by Dr. John Sparrow, the Warden of All Souls College, Oxford. It is printed here by the permission of the Warden and Fellows of All Souls.

¹⁰ A full transcript exists in the Muniment Room at Merton College.

¹¹ Almeria Selina, sole daughter of Dr. James Vaughan. She married (1816) Dr. David Hughes, Principal of Jesus College, Oxford, who died by his own hand in 1817 (cf. G. V. Cox, *Recollections of Oxford* (1868) 156). She died at Leicester, 27 March 1837 (Vaughan Papers).

¹² John (1769–1839), knighted 24 Nov. 1828, was the third son of Dr. James Vaughan. A barrister at Lincoln's Inn, he became Recorder at Leicester, 14 Feb. 1798, serjeant-at-law, 14 Feb. 1799, king's serjeant, Easter Term, 1816, Justice of the Common Pleas, 1834 (*D.N.B.*).

having absolutely lived in his bed-room and the room behind it¹³ for the last three months of it, within the walls of his College : a fact which would have called forth expulsion of any of his fellows or undergraduates . . . How far it is known I pretend not to know or suspect : but I should fear it is impossible but that it must have been most widely known and must have stood in the way not of his respectability only but also of his advancement. Why was not he a Bishop, or at least a man of first account in the University? This abominable connection must have been sufficiently notorious to stop all farther consideration of him and to render it doubtful whether he could even be allowed to retain what he had. I understand the Bishop of Litchfield¹⁴ wrote to him some months before his death about Offley ;¹⁵ which he thought he ought to have given up when he took his Chester living.¹⁶ The truth is, his excesses made him greedy and if he could have added two or three pieces more of preferment he would have swallowed them and left a load of debt for his executors to dispose of when he was gone. O shame, shame . . . It was a miserable scene to see his coffin in his chamber and afterwards in the back hall of his lodgings¹⁷—then to follow him through that dreary gate-way into his chapel¹⁸ and at length to see him lowered into the ground. But I confess it was not till I came to ruminate the matter afterwards that I was led to see it in its true light. Then and not till then the whole tissue of iniquity burst upon my view, and I could not forbear opening my mind to Almeria and to John : she seemed to have been in a conspiracy to keep me away . . . The root of *his* malady was shyness ;¹⁹ and of hers want of straightforwardness, proceeding from a want of independence and fairness of mind. I trust in God, however, that he will make me some little comfort to her, and, if it may be, will use me as his instrument in correcting her evil . . . Although my late visit to Oxford was on so melancholy an occasion, and I confess I have no wish to visit it again, one or two things gratified me in the course of it. I was pleased with Christ Church and pleased with New College ; but above all in renewing acquaintance with All Souls where an old bedmaker without knowing who I was instantly informed me upon my asking to see the Hall that ' Mr Vaughan's picture was just arrived '.²⁰ It was late in the evening and all was very sombrous about me, but I had light enough to discern that it is a most interesting portrait and a very strong likeness. It stands by the side of Bp. Heber,²¹ who, I suppose, must have been dead when I was engaged in looking at him. His picture is rather larger, but I should think a very inferior performance. I am sincerely grieved at his death. Some one no doubt will be found to take his place ; a station such as his never wants votaries. But it is a mournful truth that the climate eats up its European inhabitants. I know little comparatively of Heber, but Middleton,²² his predecessor, ranks very high in my catalogue of scholars who have rendered service to the church by their knowledge . . .

Before I conclude I must beg you not to imagine that there is the least degree of shyness between the Serjt. and Almeria and myself on the ground of the subject I have hinted at : last, I have become but still more chagrined with myself, and I have spoken my mind :

¹³ Traditionally the Warden's bedroom was in the set known as the Queen's Rooms (now the Breakfast Room and the Queen's Room), so named because they were occupied by Queen Henrietta Maria during the siege of Oxford in the Civil War. In 1814 Warden Vaughan had put them at the disposal of the Tsar and the Duchess of Oldenburg, a fact commemorated in contemporary stained glass in the present Queen's Room. It is these rooms which seem to be referred to here.

¹⁴ Henry Ryder, bishop of Gloucester, became bishop of Coventry and Lichfield 10 March 1824 (he died 31 March 1836).

¹⁵ Peter Vaughan had become Vicar of High Offley, Staffs., in 1812, a living in the gift of the bishop of Coventry and Lichfield, who at the time of his presentation was James Cornwallis, formerly Fellow of Merton.

¹⁶ He had become dean of Chester in 1820 and rector of Northenden, Cheshire in the same year.

¹⁷ Probably the entrance to the present Estates Bursary in Front Quad.

¹⁸ Presumably the east door of the North Transept.

¹⁹ The Warden's ability to keep his distance was noted by Henry Neech, an acute Etonian seeking entrance to the College in 1821. Dr. Vaughan had already suffered severely to judge by the same description—he was ' pale and emaciated from the ravages of a long illness ' (cf. *The Etonian*, II (1821), 202).

²⁰ By Sir Thomas Lawrence, cf. Mrs. R. Lane Poole, *Catalogue of Oxford Portraits*, O.H.S., II, no. 64, 199.

²¹ Reginald Heber, bishop of Calcutta since 1822, died on 3 April 1826. His portrait had been painted by Sir Thomas Phillips in 1823 (Mrs. Poole, *op. cit.* no. 58, 197).

²² Thomas Fanshaw Middleton, bishop of Calcutta, 8 May 1814–8 July 1822.

that done, all is over—and we have nothing to do on either side but learn an useful lesson from our past error and sin.

Believe me, my dearest Brother my most beloved friend, I am yours with all sincerity and with all warmth E. T. Vaughan
Leicester Octr. 27th 1826.

The Right Honourable Charles Richard Vaughan, His Britannic Majesty's Envoy at Washington (*endorsed in another hand.* Leicester Octr. 27/26 Edward. Recd. 16 Decr.)²³

²³ I am indebted to the Warden of All Souls for help with the elucidation of several difficult passages in the text.