The Continuing Legacy of Stephen Neill

Eleanor M. Jackson

Why should anyone write another “Legacy” article about Stephen Neill, when such an admirable tribute was penned by Christopher Lamb, who clearly knew him well? A few minor inaccuracies concerning Neill’s early life notwithstanding, that article covers the broad span of his ecumenical life and work extremely well. However, the publication of God’s Apprentice: The Autobiography of Bishop Stephen Neill and the reaction to it necessitates a further assessment. The passage of time should render this more objective, though even if the principle de mortuis nihil nisi bonum no longer applies, it is still necessary to protect the confidences and reputations of the living. It is now possible to see more clearly which parts of Neill’s legacy will have abiding value, while the issues involved in Neill’s work, and his heroic struggle with his personal problems, remain highly relevant today. If one may sum up his life in a single verse of Scripture, the most appropriate text would seem to be, “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor. 4:7).

Family Background and Formative Years

Stephen Charles Neill was born in Edinburgh on December 31, 1900, the third child of missionary doctors working in Ranaghat, Bengal, under James Monro, his maternal grandfather. (He had no recollection of those early years in Bengal to aid him when he became a third-generation missionary.) James Monro was a former district commissioner in the Bengal Civil Service. Appointed commissioner of the new Scotland Yard, C.I.D., he felt obliged to resign when his campaign for better pay for police constables was rebuffed. After studying medicine, he returned to Bengal to create his own mission. In later years he often had charge of Stephen and his siblings during their parents’ absence, and his strong sense of duty, evangelical convictions, and Victorian view of personal discipline seem to have made a deep impression on Stephen.

Stephen’s father, the Reverend Dr. Charles Neill, the son of a wealthy Ulster wine merchant, was greatly influenced by Dwight Moody and evangelical revivals, being converted while a medical student. When Stephen entered Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1919, having been converted in 1914 while recuperating from mumps at boarding school, he joined the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (CICCU). He was therefore surprised to be invited to become chairman of the Cambridge Student Christian Movement (SCM) for 1922–23. It was his first real exposure to ecumenism on a national scale, for the SCM, riding on the crest of the 1921 Glasgow Quadrennial conference on the theme “Christ and Human Need,” was at the peak of its missionary influence. Neill was drawn into organizing university missions, student missions to towns and villages, and Bible study programs. It was the beginning of an important career as missioner and evangelist, which tends to be eclipsed by his work as scholar and teacher.

At Cambridge (1919–24) Neill “kept the Sabbath” by studying various theological subjects, a break from his weekday diet of Greek and Latin classics. When he was not out on the river rowing for his college, playing practical jokes in the college debating chamber, lunching in various student clubs, working in inner-city settlements and organizing boys’ camps, and supporting SCM or CICCU activities, Neill took examinations: to win scholarships in order to supplement what his father, with four sons and two daughters to educate, could afford to give him, to fulfill his course requirements, and as a sort of hobby. He read theology and history for part 2 of his tripos, obtaining a “double first,” and crowned his academic achievements by winning one of the coveted fellowships to Trinity College with a thesis comparing the writings of Plotinus with the Cappodocians fathers, particularly Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzen. It is typical of him that he did so at a time when there was no definitive text of either side, and relatively little was then known about the importance of Plotinus. The thesis involved ten months’ intensive study, but the fact that he succeeded with relative ease in producing an acclaimed work of original research made him deeply suspicious, he says, of scholarship and academic life.

Before he knew the results of his thesis, Neill had decided that in any case he would dedicate himself to missionary service in India. In his autobiography he implies he went out in 1926 as a layman to teach and to learn the language, being later ordained on the insistence of Bishop Tubbs and his colleagues in the Tirunelveli (Tinnevelly) diocese of the Anglican Church in India. The bishop’s correspondence in the Church Missionary Society archives, however, indicates that Neill did not join the CMS until after his return on furlough in 1928, though he had been teaching in mission schools. His description of his arrival in Tamil Nadu is only one of a number of red herrings in the autobiography.

Recent research into the matter by Jocelyn Murray substantiates the account given of his first year in India by Elisabeth Elliot in her biography of Amy Carmichael. Neill in fact joined his parents and one of his sisters in Dohnavur but was forced to leave the following summer after a number of clashes with Amy Carmichael. What no one has explained is how Neill thought he could work with such a powerful woman with her highly original methods. His parents would have known of her through the Keswick Convention. Interestingly, though the experiment with the Neills failed, when the Webb Peploe family joined Carmichael’s work two years later, it worked. It is striking that in a MS of over one thousand pages, Neill makes no mention of Amy Carmichael. On her part, she severed her mission’s connec-

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Stephen Neill’s concern to provide good Christian literature was matched by his intolerance of bad or old-fashioned efforts.
in his hatred of racism and his efforts to combat it. He was also revealed as a bon vivant, constantly seeking out new restaurants or local delicacies to try. His style is part of his legacy; his activities were a seamless whole, flowing from one sphere to another and thus were genuinely ecumenical. He was the thinking man’s John Mott, with the emphasis on “man.” His books bristle with sexist statements. Three Tamil-speaking women missionaries whom I consulted who met him in Kodaikanal felt he was both patronizing and dismissive of their work.

**Apologia Pro Vita Sua**

In one sense it is unfortunate that Neill set out to write an autobiography that, as he says, is a record of events, not an apologia pro vita sua. The volume provides a unique record of the major events of modern ecumenical history (i.e., the creation of the Church of South India, the formation of the WCC, the growth of the worldwide Anglican Communion), but there is too little about his inner spiritual journeyings. He concludes with: “All I ask for, really, is courage—to carry out the duty as long as it is required, not to grow impatient, to work as long as I can while it is day, for night comes when no man can work—but after all there is no night time but, as John Donne was tireless in insisting, only the unchanging radiance of an everlasting day.” What inner experiences framed these lines?

Of his conversion, he writes:

> It occurred to me that, if it was true, as I had every reason to believe, that Christ died for my sins, the rest of my life could not be spent in any other way than in grateful and adoring service of the One who had wrought that inestimable benefit. Even now I can see no way of improving on that discovery. I can recall no emotional accompaniment. All that happened was that I got out of bed and said my prayers, a ceremony which I had neglected for a considerable period. . . .

I did not speak to anyone of what had happened to me; nor do I imagine that my family noticed any great change in me.⁷

Neill believed that this event made him human, that he gradually got his temper under control. He started to join in the religious life of the school, to take an interest in people for their own sakes, and to come out of his reclusiveness. At the same time he began to develop an appreciation of the beauties of the natural world, to which he had previously been blind.

Of his decision to become a missionary, he writes:

> There can never have been anything less emotional than my acceptance of the vocation of a missionary. For years I had been convinced that, since Christ died for all men, no less than for me, this gospel of Christ must be preached to all men, whether they will hear or forebear; that this gospel will not be preached unless a sufficient number of those who are young, free and in reasonable health, are prepared to forego all worldly ambition and accept the call to become Christ’s witnesses and stewards.⁸

Neill declared that he never had any regrets about his decision to go to India. His love of the Indian people, especially Tamils, is palpable, but it is difficult to avoid asking why he should have had any regrets anyway. Thanks to the Student Volunteer Movement, his decision was not so uncommon,⁹ although for Trinity College it was. Speculating on what he might have been had he stayed in Cambridge, the works of scholarship he might have produced, the ecclesiastical rank he might have attained, had he directed theological education in Britain instead, is futile. Like his Greek heroes in his beloved Aeschylus, he was driven by fate—in his case, the Monros’ inexorable sense of duty—and because of chronic ill health, violent temper, and repressed sexuality, he carried within himself the seeds of his own destruction, his own personal tragedy. He himself insists that had he married, as he aspired to do in his early twenties, he would have been a better man. Like Archbishop Garbett, also intensely shy, when his hopes were disappointed once, he never developed a comparable romantic attachment.

Neill declares in the autobiography that if a boy lets it be known that he has certain principles, no attempts will be made to corrupt him at public school, and he insists that although he knew Tawney and the “Apostles” at Cambridge, he was not in their circle.¹⁰ Homosexuality was a crime in Britain until 1968, and certainly for one brought up in a strict evangelical house-

**Neill did not hesitate to say unpopular things and was unflagging in his efforts to combat racism.**

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April 1995
acute form the question of who cares for the carers. Only once did Neill have a sympathetic bishop. Another told him to take some aspirin and pull himself together. He kept going through years and years of darkness until he found peace. The story has inspired Professor C. F. D. Moule to write, in his foreword to God’s Apprentice, “Readers will want to give thanks for the grace of God—grace abounding—and for the extraordinary achievements of this much-tempted, brilliant, enigmatic man.”

Notes
2. E. M. Jackson, ed., God’s Apprentice: The Autobiography of Bishop Stephen Neill (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991). The original manuscript that Neill left for publication after his death was over one thousand pages long. At the insistence of the publishers, I greatly reduced its length in my editing. The original is in the CMS archives, 157 Waterloo Road, London, and may be seen by qualified scholars.
5. There is a whole chapter describing Neill’s literary work in the original manuscript of his autobiography.
9. For example, A History of Christian Missions, on single women on the mission field (p. 256), on Carey (p. 260), on Ward (p. 264).
12. Ibid., p. 70.
14. R. L. Tawney was a leading Christian socialist and author of Religion and the Rise of Capitalism. The “Apostles,” a group of Cambridge economists inspired by Tawney and disciples of John Maynard Keynes, were known for their homosexuality.
15. The Church Times is the principal newspaper of the Church of England. Bishop Holloway’s frank review, which appeared in the issue of November 9, 1991, started a controversy that was continued in the remaining November issues.
16. Neill was invited to participate in the commission on theological education at the 1938 IMC meeting in Tambaram, which proved to be his entree into the ecumenical world. His survey of theological colleges in Africa in 1952 proved to be a seminal work.

Selected Bibliography
Writings of Stephen Neill
Stephen Neill was immensely proud of the serried ranks of his own books upon his bookshelves. A complete bibliography would number more than sixty-five books, apart from articles and reviews. It is curious, as he himself remarked, that although so many of his lectures were published, no volume of sermons appeared. The following selected bibliography is based on a chapter in the full length manuscript of his autobiography but which was excised from the published volume. In the excised chapter he explained which of his writings he felt were the most significant.

1957 Seeing the Bible Whole. London: Bible Reading Fellowship.

World Christian Books (all published in London by Lutterworth)
1954 The Christian’s God.
1955 The Christian Character.
1956 Who Is Jesus Christ?
1958 Paul to the Galatians.
1960 What Is Man?
1962 Chrysostom and His Message: A Selection from the Sermons of St. John Chrysostom.
1963 Paul to the Colossians.

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