

FACT SHEET 344

A literary portrait of Dr George Ridding: Bishop of Southwell, 1884-1904

Peter Clough
Pepperpots, 2024

After a distinguished academic career, culminating as headmaster of Winchester College from 1867-1884, Dr George Ridding was appointed as the first Bishop of Southwell. He cared with great dedication for this new diocese for twenty years, retiring shortly before his death in 1904 at the age of seventy-six. He is not forgotten. Worshippers at Southwell Minster will know the splendid bronze statue of Bishop Ridding by F.W. Pomeroy; but they will almost certainly not know of a subtle but excellent literary tribute within a once popular but now neglected Victorian novel.

Red Pottage, by Mary Cholmondeley (pronounced 'Chumley') was the literary sensation of 1899, but it is not well known today, despite a reprint from the feminist publisher Virago in 1985. Potential readers may find a second-hand copy, but the full text is also available online. *Red Pottage* tackles the themes of late Victorian romance, ambition and the strait jackets of Victorian society. As a novel it is good but not outstanding. The plot is absorbing but complex and a wider modern interest is found in an early feminist theme, and in Mary Cholmondeley's informed criticism of late Victorian Christianity, especially shallow and rigid evangelicalism. This is developed through her characters, notably a vicar called James Gresley, but also in his counterweight, the Bishop of Southminster – a gratifyingly decent church leader, who provides a rare literary portrait of a liberal Victorian Christian.

While some key scenes feature London, most of the novel's scenes are in the fictional and rural 'Middleshire', a setting not unlike George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. The book centres on the lives of two young women, Rachel West and Hester Gresley, close friends since childhood, whose lives criss-cross on the snakes and ladders of the Victorian social scale. It would not be fair to new or potential readers of Mary Cholmondeley to spoil the plot any further, but it is intriguing to examine within *Red Pottage* the clerical characterisation, especially the villainous attitudes and practices of the Reverend James Gresley, the brother of Hester. At the same time, by presenting a magnanimous and enlightened bishop, it gives a wider and perceptive portrait of the Church of England at the end of the nineteenth century. If James Gresley is a hypocritical prig, then his antithesis is the Bishop of Southminster, a character in whom we can see Cholmondeley at her subtle best. If Gresley depresses us, then the bishop should inspire. He is an original, warm and pragmatic man, full of culture and integrity. His likeness is not common in Victorian literature.

The bishop is a humane and experienced pastor who ministers diligently to his clergy. He reassures a young priest with doubts by seeing him at 11.00 pm; he visits the sick bed of a dying incumbent; and – above all – he is a pastoral genius to all with problems, using quiet and discreet wisdom, not arrogant authority. He listens to people and prays silently as he

listens. There are long pauses in his most critical conversations and, when he finally speaks, wisdom flows. He seldom condemns or displays anger – even when Gresley is at his most infuriating – but he can be judicious and firm. He wears his authority lightly, but it is still there. He is no lightweight who can be pushed into corners by squabbling clerical factions. Moreover, his humanity is plain and attractive. His thinking is liberal, and he is a charming and generous host, with humour and refined taste. His literary opinions are advanced, and he recognises the genius behind Hester’s writings, judging both the mood and character of the age with perception. He has the instinct of a true priest.

Although I have found no previous source to confirm my contention, I have no doubt that Mary Cholmondeley’s model for this enlightened prelate was Bishop George Ridding, a man who brought great powers of organization, tact and moderation to bear on the management of the newly created Diocese of Southwell. There is a large hint in the fictitious title, Bishop of Southminster, since the diocesan seat is Southwell Minster (not Southwell Cathedral). But the physical description of the Bishop in *Red Pottage* also matches Ridding:

‘The bishop was an undersized, spare man, with a rugged, weather-beaten face and sinewy frame. If you had seen him working a crane in a stonemason’s yard...or sailing paper boats with a child, you would have felt he was the right man in the right place. That he was also in his right place as a bishop had never been doubted by anyone’.

All the accounts of Ridding as a pastor and administrator closely match the fictional bishop. He had erudition and learning, but not to excess like some academic bishops; he had wisdom and judgement of character, honed from his time as Headmaster of Winchester where he ran a liberal and well-respected regime; and he was noted for his good humour, dry wit and humanity. Mary Cholmondeley would have found him a highly congenial model for church leadership at the turn of the twentieth century, but she may have despaired that there were too few like him on the bench of bishops.

Although the pleas for religious toleration and a liberal tradition are less prominent within *Red Pottage* than the powerful case for female emancipation, they are nonetheless clearly set out. Mary Cholmondeley held a burning torch for the advancement of the broad, liberal church in the late 1890s and in doing so paid glowing tribute to the first Bishop of Southwell.

Dr Peter Clough is licensed as a Reader in both Canterbury and Norwich Dioceses and is a keen student of the Victorian Church and its religious literature.

