**Kenneth Cracknell: an appreciation.**

If Kenneth Cracknell had been a one-dimensional figure, someone with ordinary vices and virtues whose life had followed a predictable and conventional course, then naturally there would be little prospect of a volume such as this one to honour his sixty fifth birthday. Any appreciation could have waited until his obsequies were sung in some remote Texan tabernacle or Essex preaching house. It's the very fact that he's such a complex person, however, that makes him so interesting and eminently worthy of this tribute. Indeed, it's out of the vortex of often contradictory elements within his character that much of his energy and most of his deep reflection on life have come.

Nothing in his outward appearance prepares you for the experience of meeting him. These days he's larger than life. Seated on a sofa, he colonizes the whole of its space, shirt tails loose and (occasionally) bare flesh obtruding. Seen in the distance, perhaps leading a group of Americans through the streets of London, his ambling gait suggests precisely nothing of the General Custer model of leadership. He's the male equivalent of an "earth mother." But the way his companions cluster around him, the attention he gains in front of a class, the sheer virtuosity of his conversation, soon give the lie to all such facile first impressions. None of this, of course, makes it any the easier to offer an adequate appreciation at the outset of a volume like this. Even so, the very difficulty of the task makes for a far more stimulating challenge. Who, after all, wants to write about the Reverend I.B.A.Bore B.A.?

"One helluva guy", "deceptively indolent", "a probing intellect", "playful and humorous", "a prophet", "insecure", "no sufferer of fools". All these descriptive tags spring out of various conversations and assessments I've accumulated before settling down to this task. But I believe that it's in some words of John Macmurray, quoted by Kenneth in the introduction to one of his own books, that the key to his personality and character are most readily to be found. Macmurray claimed that "all meaningful knowledge is in order to action, and all meaningful action is in order to friendship." This volume of essays by a group of people who've enjoyed the friendship of Kenneth Cracknell is fitting proof that the pudding of his life and work does very well in the eating. He's pretty much done it as well as said (or written) it.

The facts of Kenneth's life are not difficult to set forth. He was born in Leigh-on-Sea in June 1935, one of two sons, to a somewhat overbearing father who worked in the City and an equally strong-minded mother who,

however, was less stern and far more approachable. In 1954, after education at the Royal Liberty School in Romford, Kenneth went up to Oxford where he read English. It was at this time that he came under the influence of Donald Lee, minister of the Wesley Memorial Church, and the John Wesley Society which brought Methodist students in Oxford together for study and fellowship.

The Cracknells were a Methodist family but Kenneth received scant encouragement when he expressed an interest in entering the ministry. He suffered repeated nightmares in which he was always running to catch a departing bus. Someone advised him to check the route number of the bus which turned out to be the one which would have taken him away from home. Clearly, over the years, he has successfully established his own identity and shaken off the more negative aspects of his upbringing but a certain insecurity has remained, a legacy that's trailed behind him "like a flapping shirt-tail" as he has himself confided. Few would guess it, but some of his colleagues at the Richmond theological college where he was sent (1957-59) for ministerial training immediately after leaving Oxford, remember him as a withdrawn and introspective figure, giving little indication of the way his life would subsequently turn out.

In 1959, Kenneth married Elizabeth, an occupational therapist from York, whom he'd met at Oxford. Slim, energetic and forthright, she contrasted with Kenneth in many ways. To what extent she resembled Mrs Cracknell Senior we can only speculate. She was a convinced socialist and held no brief for the traditional role of a minister's wife. She'd bristle whenever introduced as Mrs Kenneth Cracknell. She was prototypically the very model of the modern liberated woman. Kenneth was immensely proud of her achievements, and later she was to become principal of a college in Northampton. In times of great stress he found it almost impossible to function without her. Their eventual separation was deeply traumatic. Life in the Cracknell household can rarely have been dull.

Leaving Richmond after graduation, Kenneth served a two year period as a minister "on probation" in Bourne, Lincolnshire. During this time he offered for service overseas and, in 1961, moved to Leeds to take a one year teaching diploma. Penny was born during these years, soon to be followed by Sarah and Debbie. We must guess that Kenneth's theology was still at this stage pretty much "dumbed down." Certainly, he was to find it inadequate for the challenges waiting for him in Eastern Nigeria where the Methodist Missionary Society sent him in 1962. Indeed, he himself is disarmingly frank about his mental and spiritual unreadiness for the work he was to undertake in West Africa.

He worked amongst the Igbo people in those years when rumours of war, the threat of war and the bitter experience of war hung heavy in the air. He undertook educational and theological work with his colleagues and students who came from many tribal and linguistic backgrounds. He discovered that his time in Nigeria raised fundamental questions which he felt himself singularly ill equipped to deal with. “I missed so many opportunities both to learn and to teach,” he wrote many years later, “because I had not woken from a deep dogmatic slumber….Like many others, I was convinced that the missionary task was to bring the light of Christ to heathen darkness. The task I thought I had to undertake was primary evangelism leading to conversion. In the traditional Methodist language, I had ‘nothing to do except to save souls.’”

Whatever the impact of his life and work on the peoples of Eastern Nigeria in the five years he and his family spent there, there was no doubt about the effect of this experience upon his own thinking. He learned the Igbo language and discovered that “the Igbo and the other peoples of Africa knew much about God before ever a white missionary set foot in their territory.” They had a well developed understanding of God as transcendent Being and they also treasured belief in an immanent form of deity too. Their language was rich with words like “grace” and “holy” and so much else. This led Kenneth into a time of deep questioning about the origins and nature of such a rich deposit of faith and spirituality. It also led him to develop a radical new conceptual framework for his own Christian faith both for its own sake and also in terms of its relationship with other faiths. He came to have serious reservations about his own formation for ministry where all talk of “points of contact” between Christianity and other faiths, and any possibility of building upon the religion of the people to whom the missionary went, had in advance been firmly rejected. He found he could no longer accept the dismissive attitude of so much traditional missiological thinking that envisaged, quite simply, “the radical displacement of the old by the new.” Thus began what was to become his lifelong search for precisely those points of contact that he now firmly believed did indeed represent common ground between different religions, different schools within the same religion, different orientations and different traditions. The direction of his life from this point on was firmly set “towards a new relationship.”

With the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war, expatriates began to be moved out of Biafra in advance of the worst of the fighting. Kenneth was left behind to support the pregnant wife of a colleague. With the child born, a highly dangerous journey now had to be undertaken and it proved

to be something of a nightmare as the party made its way silently by boat and through swamps when the crying of the baby might have cost them their lives. In addition to these difficulties, Kenneth was tormented by feelings of guilt that he had forsaken his Biafran flock and left them to a grisly fate.

Reunited in the United Kingdom, the Cracknells found accommodation in an MMS "safe house" in Syston, near Leicester in December 1967. Whilst they were there, the minister of the nearby Shepshed church died and Kenneth stepped into the breach, undertaking an eighteen month interregnum. This unexpected pastoral experience in, of all places, rural Leicestershire, gave Kenneth his first opportunity to put some of his new ways of thinking into practice. This proved to be a very interesting time.

The circumstances of his leaving Nigeria must have marked Kenneth very deeply. Now he found himself in a church hardly less traumatised. It had lost its minister in tragic circumstances. His widow remained in the manse but needed to be re-housed. There had been several abortive attempts to unite Shepshed's two Methodist churches and a dark suspicious brooding continued to hang in the air threatening to stultify any further efforts to bring the two congregations together. A long-planned stewardship campaign, about to start, had to be launched in circumstances that could hardly have been less favourable. Two prominent laymen had recently died, one by his own hand. Kenneth, barely coping with his own burdens, stepped into a pastoral charge with plenty of its own to spare.

The Cracknells had to leave their MMS house before the Shepshed manse was ready for occupation. They took temporary refuge in a cottage, subsequently demolished, that even then was very inadequate. Accommodation was cramped for five and, to make matters worse, there was no bathroom. But they decided to turn their need into an ecumenical opportunity. At bathtime the whole family was to be seen, towels in hand, making their way across the road to the Catholic presbytery, home of the delightful Fr Paul Klee. This led to a flowering of ecumenical relations in the town at a time when a progressive Baptist and an energetic Anglican were more than happy to join in the fun. It all makes you wonder about the non-theological factors at work in the shaping of church life. A former President of the Conference once wrote a little book entitled "Incidental Evangelism" in which he wanted to show how it's the ordinary events in our everyday lives which frequently provide the best opportunities for evangelistic outreach. The Shepshed *aggiornamento* of 1967 could well have yielded a pamphlet called "Incidental Ecumenism"

in the warmth and glow of its own little springtime for inter-church relationships there. And the Cracknell's need of a bathroom could just have become a major contributing factor in the search by local Christians for the holy grail of Church Unity. Things have certainly never been the same since. But if Kenneth's ablutionary needs got ecumenical relationships onto a better footing, it was the simple force of his personality that brought domestic rationalisation to the two Methodist congregations in the town. They'd squabbled for a decade about any scheme to bring them together under one roof. Since he was only to be in Shepshed for a short while, Kenneth thought he could turn that fact to advantage and sort things out. He did so with conspicuous energy and enthusiasm. The whole thing was bundled through in twelve months with just a few somewhat predictable losses. The united church took a new name, elected new officers, and established itself in the building previously occupied by the larger of the two congregations.

It was teaching, however, that had always been at the heart of Kenneth's work. His skill in this area, together with the eloquent way he could articulate and advocate his deeply felt convictions, gave him a formidable array of communication abilities. Add a winsome sense of humour and the mixture is highly contagious. If you can detach yourself from what he is saying long enough to admire his technique, it is a fascinating exercise. His emotional power guarantees total sincerity but this is never used to manipulate. Certainly he tells his hearers what they want to hear but, having gained their confidence, he leads them beyond themselves. The hallmark of his teaching, and indeed of so many other facets of his life and work, was his passion. In Methodism we are all too frequently accustomed to the cool head and the warm heart. Kenneth's head was certainly cool but the temperature of his heart was many degrees higher than merely warm. His very soul burned fiercely, ignited by the ideas or fired by the causes which might be under discussion at any one time. He seemed always able to take his students into the heart of the matter being studied and, adding his own emphasis, he'd often give it an international spin while introducing his hearers to "situation ethics" along the way. People knew that his ability to present the deep understandings of his intellect with such disarming and totally accessible clarity was a rare quality. Indeed, it was a pearl without price. His skills as a speaker and a teacher made him as welcome at the Sisterhood (the seat of reaction!) as at the Rotary Club, a university symposium or the local Muslim community. As one witness to all this put it: "Never burdened by an excess of modesty, he nevertheless inspired loyalty and enthusiasm amongst those who listened to him."

Stories galore abound from this part of his ministry. He was singularly well endowed with miasmic absent-mindedness for which he often compensated by the exercise of startling gifts of improvisation. Once, he was on his way to conduct a funeral. His own ancient Ford being hors de combat, he was given a lift by a member of his flock who, long after she'd safely delivered him at the crematorium, discovered he'd left his cassock and book of offices on the back seat of her car. By the time she became aware of this fact it was far too late to take corrective action. Exactly what he wore for the funeral is lost in the mists of time but apparently he had no difficulty dreaming up a funeral service. No one raised the slightest objection to the way things turned out. On another occasion, whilst leading a service, the appointed reader of the day read the wrong lesson - it's quite likely Kenneth had given imprecise details over the telephone. Rather than embarrass the person who'd miscued, he spontaneously preached on the wrong reading. Again, no one noticed a thing.

His bedside manner was unique. It has attracted adjectives like "quixotic," "unpredictable" and "creative." Once you let him through the front door you'd never know where he'd be next. Probably at the bottom of the garden, or inconsequentially opening and closing cupboards and drawers, or endlessly spooning sugar in the sugarbowl. He was a stranger to embarrassment. Restless and fidgety, he never sat in chairs but lounged or sprawled, twitching his legs constantly while the conversation ebbed and flowed. Once, having accepted an invitation to lunch, he brought a pile of marking with him but instead of attending to it when the meal was over, he elected rather to sleep off the lunchtime beverage on the sofa. The marking must eventually have been done though no one could guess when.

In September 1969, Kenneth ended his time at Shepshed and was moved to nearby Loughborough which was to be his home for the next eighteen years. For the first eight of these he was a local minister there. He and the superintendent Denis Gardiner formed a team ministry which soon broadened to include Anglican and the United Reformed Church members. This led to the formation of an ecumenical parish involving the central town churches of all three churches. Kenneth, despite possessing all the qualities of a gadfly, showed rare sensitivity in the handling of inter-church relations. He had the ability to summarise and clarify what others were trying to say. He provided a kind of "intellectual power house" for this brand new and widely admired venture.

On one occasion, when the members of the ecumenical team were being helped by a consultant to see each other more realistically, they were asked to make a coat of arms for each other to help achieve this objective. As a result of this ingenious exercise, Kenneth turned out to be a "tattered ferret rampant."

The part of his job he loved the most during the Loughbourough years was drifting around the university campus engaging in discussion with members of staff or students who were passing by. Many who were in contact with him at this time recognized his considerable influence on their lives. As one student put it, "Kenneth was the first minister I'd met who was an approachable human being to whom you could say anything at all."

Things were not quite so straightforward in the domestic sphere, however. It was at this time that the marriage with Elizabeth came to an end. For some time, Kenneth was a lost soul. The relationship had always held a tension between two dynamic personalities. Perhaps Kenneth found a conflict between his profession and marriage. Certainly Elizabeth had professional ambitions of her own. When John Williams, a Loughborough colleague and a splendid minister, left the ministry to join his wife in self-employed business, Kenneth observed that he (Williams), having had to choose between his work and marriage, in opting for the latter had made the wrong choice. All these years later, however, Williams remains adamant that Kenneth's assessment was wrong. Everything went swimmingly in the new life he'd chosen. Possibly this incident allows us to catch a glimpse of Kenneth and Elizabeth's own dilemma.

Denis Gardiner, Kenneth's superintendent throughout these Loughborough years, had a ringside view of the man at work. His great achievement, in Gardiner's view, lay in his ability to relate intellectually across the whole spectrum of religious faith. He found a way to engage creatively with fundamentalist Christians and also with people of other faiths. He seemed able to win their confidence on the basis of mutual respect without compromising his own position or intellectual integrity. This was (and remains) a remarkable skill when most people, faced by the same challenges, opt either for a polarised position or else attempt to build bridges at the expense of their own convictions.

It has often been supposed that Kenneth doesn't suffer fools gladly. But Gardiner thinks the opposite is true and that there is no intellectual arrogance with Kenneth at all. On the other hand, pretentiousness and

pomposity really get his goat. Confronted by any manifestation of self-importance of this kind, he is very likely to over-react and be really cutting with his criticism or sarcasm. So much so that he's frequently got himself into hot water.

Sometimes Kenneth cultivates an appearance of vagueness but this is all really part of an act. He works hard at appearing helpless and impractical. He loves people to imagine he's hopeless at administration when, if he were pushed, he'd cope well enough. It's Gardiner's view that, possibly as part of his stewardship, Kenneth likes to keep his energies for what he does best. For others, however, these phenomena are often put down to a dependency on others and a capacity for laziness.

A lovely example of Kenneth the "innocent abroad" springs from these early years. He once surprised his entourage by appearing in public with a hairstyle that could only be described as "Mohican." People wondered if this amounted to ethnic solidarity or whether he was doing it for a bet. Both were conceivable possibilities. Under interrogation, however, he admitted to having bought a razor comb in order to reduce his hairdressing bill. Tentatively passing the instrument across his head, he was startled to discover half his hair lying disconsolately at his feet. Delilah would have been proud of him. A long-suffering barber did what he could to repair the devastation but it was weeks before his quirky coiffure reverted to something approaching social acceptability and longer still before Kenneth ceased being teased on the subject.

Since leaving the pastoral ministry, Kenneth's life has moved through three different phases. Firstly, there were his years with the British Council of Churches as its Executive Secretary for Relationships with People of Other Faiths. In this job he traveled 50,000 miles a year as he gave shape and focus to the response of British Christians to the existence and challenge of other faith communities within our own shores. It was a pioneering role at a time when we were only just waking up to the hard questions we needed to face in this area of our national religious life. The old-style treatment of other faiths which had always been gathered up and subsumed under the title "Comparative Religion" would no longer do in a context where people of different faith shared streets and neighbourhoods in most of the major conurbations of the land. Kenneth's own book, *Towards a New Relationship,* was the fruit of all the work he did at the BCC. As he put it himself: "The theology wrought out in the book has been produced for the most part not in the calm of the study but on my feet, in response to the endless challenges and anguished questions that living with religious pluralism brings to Christians everywhere." And it

was a brave book. It dealt honestly with real questions faced by ordinary people every day. I remember exactly where I was, in faraway 1986, as I read his honest and careful exegesis of John 14.6: "No one comes to the father but by me." I was sitting on the top deck of a number 88 bus held up in a traffic jam at Marble Arch. I was so gripped by Kenneth's complex but passionate argument that I failed to notice that the bus had started moving again and that I'd missed my stop. I'm fully aware, of course, that his approach to such questions doesn't please everyone. But his courage in taking hold of nettles and his readiness to handle difficult subjects is exemplary.

From the British Council of Churches, Kenneth moved in 1988 to Cambridge where he held the Michael C. Gutteridge Chair of Systematic and Pastoral Theology at Wesley House. This gave him an important role within the Cambridge Theological Federation whose President he eventually became. Many changes were made to the Theological Tripos (the Cambridge initial degree) to bring it into touch with contemporary realities during his years there. Indeed, Kenneth made a very important contribution to the whole process. An increasing number of the Methodist students coming to Wesley House during his time there tended to be from a charismatic or evangelical background. This didn't worry Kenneth so much as the anti-intellectualism with which some of them came and to which they clung tenaciously. This sometimes drove him close to despair. Mercifully, his contact with a wider range of students across all the theological colleges in Cambridge gave him horizons far more varied and, it must be said, more interesting.

Having done so much pioneering work with the BCC to help its member churches become more aware of the multi-cultural realities surrounding them, Kenneth now became a leading proponent of the need to give trainees for ministry (Anglican and United Reformed as well as Methodist) as full and rigorous a formation in such matters as possible. Here again he was a pioneer. He worked hard to devise and implement a new curriculum for ministerial training and also for the academic study of theology within the university of Cambridge. To do this he often had to persuade reluctant and conservative institutions to change old ways of doing things. And all the while, as if all his achievements in this area weren't enough, he was chipping away at his next book, *Justice, Courtesy and Love*, which appeared in 1995 at the very end of his time in Cambridge.

The remarkable thing about this large book, apart from the fact that 150 of its 440 pages consist of notes and bibliography, is its subject matter.

These days it's easy to be highly critical of the old-fashioned missionary who is such an easy target for social and political historians. The missionary can be, and often is, blamed for every social ill from colonial exploitation and the slave trade on the one hand to an erroneous belief in the inevitability of progress, the besetting heresy of late nineteenth century liberal protestantism, on the other.

Some of this criticism is well placed, of course, but Kenneth takes up the cudgels for those missionaries whose good practice in the period 1846-1914 made them students of other cultures and beliefs, people who listened to the voices of those amongst whom they lived. Here were sensitive and intelligent men and women seeking to establish precisely those "points of contact" which Kenneth felt he'd been advised against when he himself had gone as a missionary to Nigeria. It's a brilliant book and shows Kenneth's genius for identifying the worthwhile amongst neglected or even despised groups. This surely, when all's said, is his supreme gift.

It was during his years at Cambridge that Kenneth met Susan White who was at that time teaching liturgy at Westcott House. Their friendship brought together gifts of personality and character that were truly formidable in their range and intensity. Susan's dedicated scholarship must have been a constant stimulus to Kenneth in those times of dryness when the weight of his administrative and teaching duties could easily have been a huge disincentive to his own research and writing. Jesus Lane, which divides Westcott from Wesley House, soon bore the footprints of both Susan and Kenneth as the relationship developed and flourished. Their marriage brought so much to each and almost as much to all their friends.

When Susan was offered a teaching job in Texas, Kenneth resigned from his position in Cambridge and accompanied her across the Atlantic. He did some freelance work as Director of Global Studies and Research Professor in Theology and Mission at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth. But it didn't take his new colleagues longer than five minutes to recognize the quality of the man who'd descended like an astronaut amongst them. He now holds a chair there in his own right. These days Kenneth and Susan share their time between Texas and Essex.

In 1998, Kenneth popped up at the Methodist Conference in Scarborough where, under the auspices of Cliff College, he gave a lecture on "Classical Christianity" which became a small book called *Our Doctrines: Methodist Theology as Classical Christianity.* "I have come to

believe," he writes in the book's preface, "that many of the insights and emphases of Methodism are essential to ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, and need therefore to be recaptured and revitalized." He then spells out some of those insights and emphases. It's an interesting and impressive list. "The value of the doctrinal clause in the 1932 Deed of Union, the theological importance of Wesley's *Forty Four Sermons* and the *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, the significance for church life of hymnody (and disastrous consequences of bad hymnody), the distillation of Wesleyan theology in two key phrases, 'evangelical Arminianism' and 'the optimism of grace', and the vital relevance of the conception (sic) of 'prevenient grace' to all aspects of Christian mission - to social action, to pastoral care, and to life in a religiously plural world." Here Kenneth roots all his experience and achievements in the worlds of ecumenism and interfaith relationships firmly within the rich sub-soil of his own Methodist self-understanding.

And so this little character study draws to its conclusion. Since much of what follows will inevitably focus upon those themes and issues which preoccupied Kenneth in his years at the BCC and in Cambridge, I wanted particularly to spend a little more time looking at those Leicestershire years when, as an "ordinary Methodist minister", the process of self-discovery was at its most critical for Kenneth. For much of what I've written about these years I'm deeply in the debt of David Stevenson, a church member there who still wakes up in the middle of the night laughing or crying or shouting "Amen" at some remembrance of times past when Kenneth waded through the lives of the unsuspecting people of Shepshed and left his mark on them for ever. Some of the Cracknell stories I've left out of this account I shall definitely be using at after-dinner speeches for a long time to come!

It's many years since I read some words which described the probing and searching mind of Sir Thomas Browne, a seventeenth century divine. Apparently he was what we sometimes describe as a "renaissance man," a person skilled and knowledgeable across many fields. "He had the capacity," my source declared, "to live in divided and distinguished worlds, and to pass freely to and fro between one and another, to be capable of many and varied responses to experience. Many different worlds or countries of the mind lay close together - the world of scholastic learning, the world of scientific experiment, the worlds of classical mythology and of Biblical history, of fable and fact, of theology and demonology, of sacred and profane love, of pagan and Christian morals, of activity and contemplation; *and a cultivated man had the*

*freedom of them all.* (Basil Willey: The Seventeenth Century Background, 1962, p45; my italics).

For Browne substitute the name Cracknell. Kenneth has fearlessly explored the worlds of Christian and other faiths, those inhabited by Methodists and Christians of other traditions, the Wesleyan and the Primitive Methodist sub-cultures, the two different English-speaking civilisations separated by the Atlantic ocean, the mental world of the conservative evangelical as well as that of the so-called liberal. He has moved freely between the camps. If there are walls and barriers between them, he has shown them not to be impregnable or unassailable. He has introduced people of the same family again and again to each other. John Macmurray's encomium quoted at the outset can be seen clearly to fit Kenneth Cracknell like a glove. All meaningful knowledge is indeed in order to action and all meaningful action is palpably in order to friendship. And this book is a fruit of friendship. Q.E.D.