

# The Visionary's World

Dominic Kirkham tells the strange story of 'Prophet' John Wroe.

The story of John Wroe, a rather obscure nineteenth century 'prophet' and visionary, centres on the small Lancashire town of Ashton-under-Lyne, a former mill town situated on the edge of Pennines. Its old industrial character now long gone, it remains the centre of the Metropolitan Borough of Tameside, which has some claim to fame as being the most efficiently administered borough in the country. But this is as nothing compared to what John Wroe prophesied for it: that this was to be the New Jerusalem, foretold in the last book of the Bible (Revelation), the place of the second coming of Christ, where the eschatological Kingdom of Heaven would begin. As I live nearby, I can assure readers this has not yet happened!

John Wroe was a woolcomber, who was born in 1782. A difficult and abusive childhood left him partially crippled and with a stammer. During an illness in 1819 he took to reading the Bible. Like many people who do so under fraught circumstances, he began to feel himself consoled and specially directed with 'illuminations' or private revelations. These made clear to him that he must learn Hebrew, join the Jewish faith and gather together the lost tribes of Israel in readiness for the end of the world and the Second Coming of Jesus, which was imminent. The movement, of which he became leader and prophet, would be known as the Christian Israelites.

At its peak, in the 1830s thousands flocked to hear his message and be baptised in the local river, the Medlock – presumably the nearest equivalent to the River Jordan. A sumptuously furnished Sanctuary was built for worship in Ashton town centre, at the then phenomenal price of £9,500 (twice the cost of the Town Hall). This was just the centrepiece of his visionary messianic city. Just outside the town – though now demolished for the building of a motorway – he purchased a house on Ashton Moss, which would become one of the 'gatehouses' of the New Jerusalem, as depicted in Chapter 21 of the Book of Revelation. I remember it as the old folk's home that it later became. Other 'gatehouses' of the citadel later became pubs. And the field in which he prophesied to large crowds of the light which would shine forth from the city 'to enlighten the Gentiles' was to become, perhaps appropriately, the site of a gas works, which would provide street lighting of a different sort.

If all of this is beginning to sound rather

improbable, it is reassurance of sorts to know that in the long history of Europe's millenarian movements (cf. Ronald Knox's *Enthusiasm* and Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium*) John Wroe was nothing if not typical. Inspired by enigmatic biblical prophecies, he himself drew much of his support from a similarly inspired group of followers of Joanna Southcott, another visionary and prophet of the Second Coming who preceded him by a decade. Joanna Southcott had also received special divine communications, which she recorded in her appropriately named book, *The Strange Effects of Faith*. Published in 1801, it brought her widespread national fame. The particular gist of her revelations was that she would bear a son, conceived of the Holy Spirit, who would usher in the Messianic Age.

After a phantom pregnancy, which came to nothing but intrigued the medical world of the day, she died on 27<sup>th</sup> December 1814. Her numerous followers immediately declared her to be 'the woman clothed with the sun', mentioned in the Book of Revelation, whose child had been snatched back to heaven for safe keeping. In a manner which shows how faith can manage not to be disappointed, her followers declared Joanna's son would shortly return – on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1820 to be precise. When this did not happen, word went out that God was only testing people's faith, but would not fail them. It was at this point that John Wroe saw his opportunity, declaring before a meeting of Southcottians, that he had received a vision in which he was commissioned to act as a prophet. From then on he would be their leader, renaming the movement the Society of Christian Israelites.

Though much of this story may seem bizarre and eccentric, it is not without a wider significance. In fact Wroe's movement can be located within a larger national context of British Israelites. According to seventeenth century antiquarians seeking to unravel the origins of Albion's ancient inhabitants, and using the Bible as a window on the ancient world, the most plausible explanation seemed to be that they had been dispersed here after fleeing from the Flood. It seemed clear, from biblical evidence, that our ancestors were no less than the remnants of the lost tribes of Ancient Israel. In his *Britannia Antiqua Illustrata* of 1676, antiquarian Aylett Sammes has a detailed map of the journey taken by the ancient Britons across Europe from Ararat to England. He argued vigorously that the



Joanna Southcott

island of Britain had been providentially set aside for the safety of these people in a land that 'abounds in all things, both for the necessary delight and support of Man... a distinct World, by it self.'

So now we have moved from the

supposed providential designs for a northern industrial town to those for a whole country. It is a view that became widely held in the eighteenth century. In fact, so persuasive was the feeling of special providential election, that it became a seminal element feeding into the optimism underlying Britain's imperial expansion – the British Empire being seen a chosen instrument of God for the advancement of mankind. So the first professor of Geology at Oxford University, Rev. William Buckland, could proudly proclaim that the great mineral wealth of the nation was 'no mere accident of nature; it showed rather, the express intention of Providence that the inhabitants of Britain should become, by this gift, the richest and most powerful nation on Earth.' At the end of his lectures he would invite the audience to sing 'God save the Queen!' This conviction of Britain's progressive destiny was admirably symbolised in a *Punch* cartoon of the time showing Queen Victoria handing a Bible to an Indian Maharajah with the caption: 'The secret of our success'.

It is not a story which ends there either. In a recent book, *Chosen People*, by the former Religious Affairs correspondent of *The Times*, Clifford Longley relates how this concept has morphed to become a central element of modern global politics. A sense of 'chosenness', based on a reading of the Bible, was central to the self-understanding of the first English settlers in America. From the outset many of the colonists who went to New England were, like John Wroe, Biblical visionaries and idealists. Such was the first governor of Massachusetts John Winthrop, with a vision of also creating a godly 'City on a Hill' – there seems to be something inherently messianic about cities on hills! Not only had these settlers the prime motive of establishing a more perfect biblical-based Christian kingdom, but they had the driving conviction that they were 'chosen' for this task.

The conviction of a special destiny under God

became a defining characteristic of the American psyche with its own historical narrative: after smiting the latter day Jebusites (native Indians) – so the narrative goes – God's chosen people went on to overthrow Magog, the false king (George III and the Hanoverian dynasty), and with the eventual demise of the British Empire, the United States of America has become the main repository of the idea of sacred destiny. Promoting this vision is the daily fare of numerous powerful media networks in the United States and beyond. TV channels beam impassioned tele-evangelists expounding biblical themes of predestination and imminent apocalypse; influential political commentators like Glenn Beck expound their own inflammatory brand of Christian Zionism.

Their message is still basically that of John Wroe: of the Bible's dramatic call, of the imminent end, the possibility of salvation, the reappearance of Jesus with the chance of being 'raptured' up to heaven, and, of course, the opportunity to fund 'the Lord's work' and invest in its rewards through support of the 'prophet'. How John Wroe would have envied the formidable power of the modern media to reach into people's lives, though it is rather cruelly ironic that his Sanctuary in Ashton would later become a cinema for popular entertainment.

In fact this enigmatic story has come full circle with the world's only superpower – its status being 'confirmation' of George Washington's belief in a 'special providence' – fostering the resettlement of the original Chosen People (the Jews) in the original Promised Land. Even the biblically-based reasoning for the colonial land grab of the 'Wild West' is eerily reminiscent and anticipatory of that now going on in the West Bank – specifically encouraged by the Christian Zionists, who see this as a decisive preparatory step for history's final consummation in the Second Coming. Thus the visionary's narrative of chosen election shapes our world.

As with all visionaries, John Wroe never became disillusioned with his interpretation of the world: the vision filters the world in such a way that there is always some further 'evidence' to support it. In seeking to understand the visionary impulse we must look to the dynamics of the wider cultural environment: times of significant social change and uncertainty create widespread demand for some directional voice. Cognitive scientist Merlin Donald provides an insight into this phenomenon when he likens human culture to 'a gigantic search-engine that seeks out, and tests, various solutions to the many cognitive challenges faced by people.' Where there is confusion, the visionary, as a product of his culture, articulates solutions, which as Donald notes, are 'ultimately products of our own attempts at self-governance.' There is no reason to think John Wroe

set out to deceive others, any more than he may have thought himself to have been deceived.

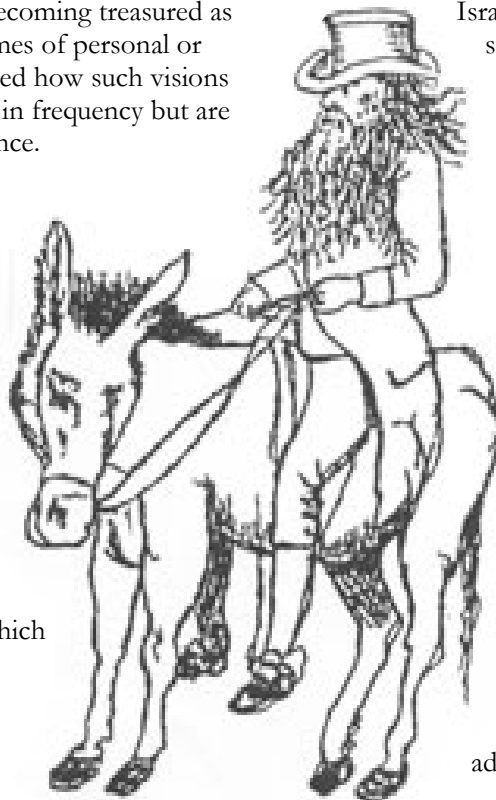
But there are deeper reasons for the visionary's world than the mere interpretation of temporal events. This is to do with states of mind. As the neuroscientist Gerald Edelman has pointed out (in, *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire*), consciousness is not a single, unitary state. Rather it is spectrum of grades from focused attention, reflectiveness and reverie to meditative states and on into the dream-world. These states can vary according to degrees of emotion or stress, physiology (e.g. epilepsy and schizophrenia) or environment. But the information conveyed in these different states of mind is no less real to the cognitive subject; in fact, dream-like visions can seem even more real than normal rational comprehension, giving rise to the impression of being revealed – becoming treasured as insights into the real world. In times of personal or social stress it has often been noted how such visions and revelations not only increase in frequency but are more likely to find wider acceptance.

If, as Donald says, the search-engine of human culture provides the necessary solutions for people to construct a meaningful world and live ordered lives, the corollary is that in times of cultural upheaval the need for new visionary solutions becomes paramount. And so we find a common thread running through the previously mentioned eras: the early Industrial Revolution, through which Wroe lived; the Reformation and Civil War, during which the American colonies were seeded. American writer, Elmer Clark summarises the situation perfectly: 'Pre-millenarianism is essentially a "defence mechanism" of the disinherited; despairing of obtaining substantial blessings through social processes, they turn on the world which has withheld its benefits and look to its destruction in a cosmic cataclysm which will exalt them and cast down the rich and powerful.'

And so the prophetic voice and visionary message becomes not only an attempt at self-governance but the tool for the manipulation of others. For, no prophet is ever content to stay silent on the mountain – or, as in the case of Wroe, in bed – where he received his visions. The immediate vision, whether real or simulated (a spying neighbour caught Wroe, whilst reputedly being in a twelve day trance, sitting up

in bed eating pickled cabbage and oat cakes) is nothing if not communicated. This in itself brings rewards, as willing devotees provide the power and privileged status that become a self-sustaining intoxicant to the visionary.

Disillusionment with his message came from other, more mundane events. After a missionary tour in 1830 with his seven elected virgins, which it had been revealed should accompany him at all times, two of them charged John Wroe with, 'indecent and things not fit to be spoken'. This caused shock waves throughout the movement. After a trial, in which he was acquitted, there was a riot in the Sanctuary, from which Wroe barely escaped with his life. He fled the country but continued his missionary career in America and Australia, where he founded other Christian Israelite communities, some of which still survive.



Contemporary drawing of John Wroe on a donkey

But for the biblically-minded prophet there is a lingering paradox: whilst the written word of the book that is the Bible can be used as the basis for the revealed, restorative vision, it is often the very proliferation of printed words, the ideas they convey and the books that contain them which cause the disturbance in the first place. As in our own time, chaotic and torrential floods of information can be overwhelmingly confusing. The visionary grasps, and clings, to particular texts like a drowning man to straws; absolute conviction draws strength from the Bible text, but as numerous millenarian and fundamentalist movements have shown, the Bible can teach anything that is demanded of it. Its ambiguity can address any eventuality.

And so it did for John Wroe, pondering its pages on his sick bed or listening to the voice coming from the second bar of the fire grate, its persuasiveness was immediate and forceful. In the quiet of one's room its direct voice becomes almost another, personal presence. John Wroe, in his solitary musings, felt illuminated and inspired to go out with his 'message', which of course was not just 'his' message but the message that had been given to him – or so he was convinced. And so it is with every visionary and prophet: we will never be without them. In the meantime Ashton-under-Lyne awaits its destiny.

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Dominic Kirkham is an interested follower of SOF. He now works for a Home Improvement Agency providing services for older people.