



# JOHN OWEN


*Prince of Puritans*



ANDREW THOMSON



**CHRISTIAN FOCUS**



Rev. Andrew Thomson, D.D., F.R.S.E. (1814 -1901) was minister of Broughton Place United Presbyterian Kirk, Edinburgh. His other books include *Thomas Boston: His Life and Times* (ISBN 1-85792-379-0) and *Richard Baxter, The Pastor's Pastor* (ISBN 1-85792-380-4). This biography of John Owen by Thomson was first published last century in an edition of Owen's works. Later it was published as a separate volume. In his biography Thomson several times refers to nineteenth century events in Scotland and England. Some of these references are obscure to the modern reader, and where possible they have been removed. Occasionally, however, it was not possible to do so, and the reader should bear this in mind when the author comments on current events. In addition, other minor editorial changes have been made.

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## MILESTONES

- 1616: Born, Stadham, Oxfordshire, England
- 1628: Admitted to Queen's College, Oxford. Receives BA in 1632 and MA in 1635
- 1633: William Laud made Archbishop of Canterbury
- 1637: Owen leaves Oxford and becomes private tutor to family of Sir Robert Dorner
- 1642: Owen's first publication, *A Display of Arminianism*
- 1643: Ministers in Fordham in Essex. Marries Mary Rooke  
Westminster Assembly convenes
- 1646: Preaches before Parliament for the first time  
Moves to Coggeshall and gathers church on Congregational model
- 1649: Execution of Charles I  
Owen becomes chaplain to Oliver Cromwell
- 1651: Appointed Dean of Christ Church, Oxford  
Becomes Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University
- 1652: Oliver Cromwell made Lord Protector  
Member of Parliament for Oxford
- 1653: Becomes DD
- 1657: Ceases to be Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University
- 1658: Death of Cromwell  
Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order
- 1660: Restoration of Charles II  
Owen ejected from Christ Church, Oxford
- 1661: Act of Uniformity excludes Nonconformists from Church of England  
Savoy Conference between twelve Anglican Bishops and twelve Puritan Divines
- 1673: Pastor of Independent Church in London
- 1677: Marries Michel D'Oyley
- 1683: Dies in Ealing, August 24th.

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The following snapshots of individuals frequently referred to in this biography may be helpful.

**Richard Baxter** (1615-1691) was born in Rowton, Shropshire. From 1641-1660 he served in a parish in Kidderminster. He initially supported the Parliamentarians but he subsequently disagreed with some of Cromwell's policies. In 1661 he took a leading role at the Savoy Conference. As a result of the 1662 Act of Uniformity, he was deprived of an ecclesiastical living. He was imprisoned in 1685 and 1686 for preaching. His best known writings are *The Reformed Pastor* (1656) and *The Saints Everlasting Rest* (1650).

**Oliver Cromwell** (1599-1658) was born in Huntingdon and it was as its representative he was elected to Parliament in 1628. Cromwell had a strong Christian faith and was a firm believer in divine providence as a guide in his military and political affairs. He has been criticised for approving of the execution of Charles I which he saw as 'a cruel necessity'. Cromwell was made Lord Protector in 1653. He was an advocate of religious toleration.

**John Goodwin** (1594-1665) was one of the few Puritans who was an Arminian. He was a strong supporter of Parliament in the Civil War and became known for his republican ideas. Although invited to be a member of the Westminster Assembly, he did not participate. He was vicar of a church in London.

**Thomas Goodwin** (1600-1680) was born in Norfolk. He became vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge. However, he developed Congregational views and in 1634 he resigned and moved to London. Persecution caused him to move to Holland in 1639 where for a while he pastored a church in Arnheim. After returning to London he was a member of the Westminster Assembly where he became the leader of the Independent delegates. In 1650 he became President of Magdalene College, Oxford. He was a leading member of the Savoy Assembly in 1658 along with John Owen. After the restoration of Charles II Goodwin pastored a church in London. His writings are strongly Calvinistic.

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**John Howe** (1630-1705) was born in Loughborough near Leicester. Given the perpetual curacy of Torrington in Devon in 1654, he worked to unite Presbyterians and Independents there, and continued to attempt to heal divisions among Christians after he was made a chaplain to Oliver Cromwell in 1657. In 1662 he was ejected from his church. In 1670 he became chaplain to Lord Massareene in Antrim Castle in Ireland. He returned to London in 1676 to become the co-pastor of a Presbyterian congregation. After the Act of Toleration in 1689, he continued his attempts to unite Presbyterians and Independents.

**William Laud** (1573-1645) was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1633. As such he organised the re-imposing of Roman Catholic practices. He strongly opposed Puritan pastors and did all he could to destroy their influence. In 1641 he was imprisoned by Parliament and was executed for treason in 1645.

**Brian Walton** (1600-1661) held several ecclesiastical appointments. Because of the unpopularity of some of his practices, especially his methods of gathering tithes, Parliament took most of his preferments from him. In 1657 he published the English Polyglot Bible (6 volumes) which contained the entire Bible in nine languages. After the Restoration, he was made Bishop of Chester.





## PREFACE

It is a matter of just regret and complaint that no elaborate contemporary memoir of this great Puritan was ever written. Twenty years after his death, Cotton Mather in his *Magnalia Americana Christi* declared 'that the church of God was wronged in that the life of the great John Owen was not written'.

It was only when twenty years more had elapsed that a life of Owen appeared from the pen of Mr. Asty, a respectable Independent minister in London, which, though written under the eye of Sir John Hartopp, a particular friend of Owen and for many years a member of his church, is chargeable with numerous inaccuracies, and so scanty withal that another of Owen's biographers, William Orme, has referred to it as 'not to contain so many pages as Owen has written books'.

In addition to this, an anonymous memoir has fallen into our hands, professing to have been written by one who 'had the honour to know this eminent person well, and to hear him frequently, though he must confess that he had not then years and experience enough to conceive a suitable idea of the Doctor's great worth'.

But the student who should wish to search for voluminous contemporary records and early reminiscences of Owen will look in vain for such full and accurate memorials as Dr. Edmund Calamy has given us of John Howe, or for such an inexhaustible storehouse of incident, and redundance of mental portaiture, as Richard Baxter has given of himself.

The sources from which the modern biographer must draw his notices of Owen, besides those already named, are to some extent



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the representatives of adversaries, who could not be silent on so great a name, or withhold reluctant praise; the not infrequent allusions to Owen in the lives of his contemporaries; the statements of general history and biography, such as are to be found in the pages of Neal, Calamy, Middleton, Palmer, and others. Perhaps the most valuable and interesting of all are the many unconscious touches of autobiography which may be found in his prefaces to his various works. Of all of these Mr. Orme has made excellent use in his life of Owen. It is a remarkable specimen of untiring research, solid judgment, and ability in the disposal of his materials, and – making some allowance for honest bias – of biographical fidelity.

And from all of these and especially from Mr. Orme himself, we shall gather the details of our biographical sketch and estimate of Owen.









# 1

## HIS YEARS OF EDUCATION



The genealogy of the subject of our memoir leads us back to a family of high rank and reputation in Wales, whose remoter links connect it with the five regal tribes. In the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI and Queen Mary, we meet with the name of Lewis Owen who was Vice-chamberlain and Baron of the Exchequer in North Wales, and High Sheriff of the country of Merioneth. He was honoured in at least two ways: by correspondence with those monarchs in reference to the affairs of Wales, and as going forth on a commission to clear the country of those felons and outlaws who had sought refuge in great numbers among its mountains, during the turbulence and relaxed authority that had arisen from the long wars between the houses of York and Lancaster.



At a later period this honoured ancestor fell a sacrifice to his fidelity as a magistrate; for, on his return from the assizes in Montgomeryshire, he fell into the hands of a band of outlaws who had taken a vow of revenge against him on account of the capture of their companions, and, deserted by all but one faithful friend, was murdered by them in the woods of Monthrey.

Humphrey Owen, a branch of this same family, married Susan, a granddaughter of Lewis Owen, and to them there were born in succession fifteen sons, the youngest of whom was Henry Owen.

Henry was dedicated by his parents to office in the church. Having received an education in language, philosophy and divinity

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at Oxford, in the course of time he became vicar of Stadham in Oxfordshire. Here he proved himself so 'painful a labourer in the vineyard of the Lord', and so uncompromising an advocate for reformation in the church, as to receive testimony to his fidelity in the jealousy and displeasure of the dominant ecclesiastical powers, and to be branded with the name of 'Puritan'.

To this worthy vicar there was born at Stadham in the year 1616, a second son, John, the subject of this memoir, who was destined to shed a new renown on their ancient house, and to eclipse, by the more substantial glory of his virtues, learning and genius, the dim lustre of their regal lineage.

Little is known regarding the childhood of Owen; and no records whatever have descended to tell us of the mother to whom was committed the training of his most susceptible years, and who was to be the Monica to this future Augustine.

#### His education

There is reason to think that Owen received the elements of a common education from the good vicar himself, under the domestic roof at Stadham. After a few years of home education, he was transferred to a private academy at Oxford, where he entered on his classical studies under the superintendence of Edward Sylvester, a tutor of eminence, several of whose pupils rose to the highest distinction, and even won for themselves at no distant date an undying fame.

A comparison of dates makes it unlikely that the two were playmates; but it is interesting to notice that the same quiet institution which now received within its walls the future great theologian of the Puritans, was also the place in which was initiated into the Greek and Roman tongues the immortal Chillingworth – of whose great work *The Religion of Protestants*, it is not too much to say that it is sufficient to shed honour, not on a university merely, but on an age.

One fact will suffice to show the energy with which the young pupil applied himself to his studies, as well as the unusually early development of his faculties: at the age of twelve, he was found to



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have outgrown the instructions of Sylvester and to be ripe for the university. He was, accordingly, entered a student at Queen's College at this age, which in the case of most youths would have been most injudiciously premature.

Even at this period it must have seemed strangely early; for, in looking into the lives of some of the most eminent of his contemporaries, we meet with no instance of similar precocity. Bishop Hall, for example, enrolled himself at Cambridge at fifteen; while his great Puritan contemporary, John Howe, did not enter Oxford until he had reached the riper age of seventeen.

Few men of great eminence appear to have occupied the chairs of the university at this period. But Owen was fortunate enough to have his studies in mathematics and philosophy superintended by a tutor of solid attainments and subsequent high distinction – Thomas Barlow, then a fellow of Queen's College, afterwards its provost, and who, in the course of time, was elevated to the see of Lincoln.

The boy-student devoted himself to the various branches of learning with an intensity that would have unhinged most minds, and broken in pieces any bodily constitution except the most robust. For several years of his university curriculum he allowed himself only four hours of the night for sleep. But he had the wisdom so far to counteract the injurious influence of sedentary habits and excessive mental toil, by having recourse to bodily recreation in some of its most robust and even violent forms.

Leaping, throwing the bar, bell-ringing, and similar amusements occasionally allured him from his books; and it may perhaps surprise some, who conceive of the men of that age as unsocial and unfriendly to all the lighter graces and accomplishments, to learn that Owen received lessons in music from Dr Thomas Wilson, a celebrated performer on the flute, and the favourite preceptor, in the same elegant and delightful art, of Charles I. It may perhaps have been from grateful recollections of these youthful and fascinating exercises, in which the student had been accustomed to unbend from too protracted and severe studies, that Owen at a future period, when elevated to the vice-

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chancellorship of Oxford, appointed his early tutor professor of music in the university.

Still, the hours which are taken from needful rest are not redeemed, but borrowed, and must be paid back with double interest in future life. Owen, when he began to feel his iron frame required to pay the penalty of his youthful enthusiasm, was accustomed to declare that he would willingly part with all the learning he had accumulated by such means, if he might but recover the health which he had lost in the gaining of it.

And he was wont to confess with a far more profound sorrow, not unminged with shame, that no holy oil at this time fed his midnight lamp. Instead the great motive which had borne him up, during those days and nights of consuming toil, was an ambition to rise to distinction and power in the church.

We can well believe that the severity of this self-condemnation would, by a judge more tender than himself, have so far been mitigated by the knowledge of another motive, which must have had considerable influence upon his mind. It arose from the fact that his father had been unable to render him any adequate pecuniary assistance, and that he had hitherto been indebted for his support to the liberality of an uncle in Wales.

But still, when more amiable motives have been allowed for their full force, a mere earthly ambition must be acknowledged to have been the mainspring of all his past efforts. Therefore, we cannot doubt that when he returned to the university at a future period, these condemnatory reminiscences arose strongly in his mind, and that, like Philip Henry in similar circumstances, while thanking God that his course had been unstained by vices, he could insert in his book, 'A tear dropped over my university sins.'

*Richard Baxter as a student*

Here let us pause for a moment to look at the circumstances of another student who was destined at a future day to shine with Owen in the same bright constellation.

While Owen was walking amid the majestic structures and academic shades of Oxford, or bending over the midnight page,



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Richard Baxter might have been seen amid the enchanting scenery of Ludlow Castle or, later still, in the small village of Wroxeter. With little help or guidance from man, but, under the promptings of an indomitable will and with an omnivorous appetite for knowledge, he was allowing no difficulties or discouragements to damp the ardour of his pursuits.

Without the advantage of the systematic training of a university or the command of the rich stores of its libraries, this was almost compensated to his athletic soul by the more discursive and varied range which both his tastes and his necessities thus gave to his studies. In the writings of Thomas Aquinas, Anselm and Duns Scotus, which to most minds would have been dry and barren as the sands of the desert, his acute intellect found high exercise and real delight. He rejoiced in whetting and exercising on them his dialectical powers, until he could rival in subtle and shadowy distinctions those ghostly schoolmen.

Two years the senior of Owen, he was also 'in Christ' before him. While the Oxford student was still feeding the fires of an earthborn ambition, Baxter had learned from Sibbes' *Bruised Reed*, and from his Bible, the art of holy meditation. Even in the later years of his student-life, he might have been seen at that hour when it was too dark to read and too early to light his lamp, devoting its sacred moments to thinking of heaven and anticipations of the 'saints' everlasting rest.

But the same grace was soon to descend upon the soul of Owen, and, co-operating with providential occurrences, to withdraw him for ever from the poor daydreams of a mere earthly ambition. While he was measuring out for himself a course which, if successful, would probably have made him a secular churchman and even an intolerant persecutor, Christ had said of him, 'I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.'

Let us now trace the influences and events which brought about in the mind and outward circumstances of Owen this mighty change.