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The Saviour of the Conference?

Reassessing Bishop Samuel Tarratt Nevill's Role at Lambeth in 1878

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Abstract

This paper argues that the role of Samuel Tarratt Nevill, bishop of Dunedin, at the 1878 Lambeth Conference has been exaggerated. In old age, Nevill alleged that he heroically defended the concept of diocesan autonomy and that, as a result, he was dubbed 'the saviour of the Lambeth Conference'. This claim has been repeated by some and doubted by others, but never with sufficient analysis of primary sources. This paper provides the first balanced discussion of the subject to establish what really happened.

A Historiographical Controversy



Samuel Tarratt Nevill has many claims to fame. As a trained palaeontologist, he played a crucial role in the reception of Darwinism in nineteenth-century New Zealand. As bishop of Dunedin from 1871 to 1919, he established an impressive infrastructure and diocesan spirit despite continual shortages of money and clergy. As primate of the Church of the Province of New Zealand from 1904 to 1919, he led New Zealand Anglicans through the First World War.

These achievements have been well documented and critically analysed by scholars. However, Nevill also has a claim to fame that seems more

dubious, and which has yet to be analysed properly. At the 1878 Lambeth Conference, bishops debated whether the archbishop of Canterbury should assume a more prominent leadership role in the Anglican Communion. Some bishops, notably George Augustus Selwyn of Lichfield, advocated making the archbishop of Canterbury the head of a voluntary arbitration system that could resolve issues within the Communion. Such a system, being voluntary, would preserve diocesan and provincial autonomy while enabling effective mediation of disputes.

In 1873, Selwyn presented a Canadian bishops' petition to the Upper House of the Canterbury Convocation asking that the archbishop of Canterbury become this 'recognised authority' and adopt the role of 'patriarch'.¹ Other petitions followed. It was agreed that this issue would be discussed at the 1878 Lambeth Conference.²

In his best-known account of the Conference, Nevill remarks that he, a staunch proponent of diocesan autonomy, went to Lambeth determined to scuttle the proposal.³ From his perspective, even voluntary arbitration would undermine diocesan autonomy because there would be moralistic pressure to accept the venerable archbishop's recommendations. He states that at a critical moment in the debate, he uttered an eloquent speech with the encouragement of Bishop Christopher

Wordsworth of Lincoln. His audacious speech was vital in ultimately defeating the proposal.

Nevill claimed that after the closing service at St. Paul's Cathedral, London, he was hailed by three bishops of the American Episcopal Church: Robert Harper Clarkson of Nebraska, John Franklin Spalding of Colorado, and Joseph P. B. Wilmer of Louisiana. They heartily shook Nevill's hands; one proclaimed him 'the saviour of the Lambeth Conference'.⁴ The Americans were so animated that local police believed that Nevill 'had fallen ill' and hurried to provide assistance.⁵

Two prominent historians have disagreed about the veracity of Nevill's account. A redoubtable historian of the Lambeth Conferences, Alan M. G. Stephenson, bluntly states that Nevill's memories are 'confused' and unreliable.⁶ In contrast, John H. Evans's history of the Diocese of Dunedin regards Nevill's conduct as historical.⁷ Neither author analyses the subject in detail because each approaches it from a different premise: Evans bases himself entirely on Nevill's writings while Stephenson relies on source material that makes no mention of Nevill's exploits. This paper is therefore the first publication to provide a nuanced perspective on the subject and establish what really happened.

Nevill's Account Has Long Been Controversial

Tellingly, Nevill's account was called into question even during his lifetime. Neither Stephenson nor Evans dwells on this fact. Nevill seldom spoke publicly about his role at the Conference and never published his 1878 journal.⁸ However, he did occasionally speak, and his comments eventually reached Archbishop Randall Davidson of Canterbury in late 1907. Nevill's account intrigued him because he, having been present at the 1878 Conference and having become one of its earliest historians, knew nothing of Nevill's claims. He combed the official Lambeth archives for corroborating evidence.

Davidson concluded that Nevill did indeed speak, but that he did not play a significant part in the proceedings. In December 1907, Davidson wrote to Nevill – a septuagenarian reflecting on events thirty years earlier – that 'you had been mistaken in what you remembered'.⁹

A stubborn man at the best of times, Nevill defended his account. He emphasised in a letter in February 1908 that he could not have misremembered because 'my part in the discussion had so marked an effect; the history of it is indelibly stamped upon my recollection'.¹⁰ He stated that his 1878 journal confirmed that the American bishops had 'thanked me for having 'saved the Lambeth Conference''.¹¹

Davidson replied in April 1908. He again concluded that 'however it may be explained your recollection is certainly at fault'.¹² Davidson even included copies of Nevill's Conference speeches – he had spoken twice – and invited Nevill to consult the Lambeth archives the next time he visited England. Perplexed by Nevill's intransigence, Davidson stressed that if Nevill persisted in exaggerating his role in 1878, other bishops less circumspect than Davidson might formally challenge the New Zealand primate at an upcoming Lambeth Conference. If this occurred, Davidson stated, 'I should of course feel at liberty to place this correspondence before the members'.¹³

Nevill made no concessions. In a letter in June 1908, he wrote, 'Notwithstanding the extracts from the shorthand reporter's notes I feel quite confident of the accuracy of all which I recounted to you in my last [letter]'.¹⁴ He emphasised again that the Americans 'greeted me as having 'saved the Lambeth Conference''.¹⁵ Curiously, he then claimed that he had made no reference to this subject for many years, which made Davidson's historical detective work unwelcome and unnecessary.¹⁶

By this point, Davidson was exasperated. He sent a final letter in July 1908 pointing out the illogicality of Nevill's last comment: if Nevill had kept quiet about the subject, it would not have come to Davidson's attention.¹⁷ Davidson concluded by sending Nevill more archival material but made clear that he considered the matter closed.

To have an archbishop of Canterbury doubt one's recollections is problematic enough. However, shortly after Nevill's death, his successor as primate, Bishop Churchill Julius of Christchurch, also cast doubt on Nevill's account at the New Zealand Church's General Synod in 1922. Some obituaries, together with Nevill's posthumously published autobiography, had lionised Nevill's role at the 1878 Lambeth Conference.¹⁸ Julius made clear that Nevill's account 'must be received with extreme caution'.¹⁹

Nevill's Account Lacks Corroborating Evidence

No primary sources corroborate Nevill's account. Randall's erudite history of the Conference, which draws extensively on first-hand evidence, does not support Nevill.²⁰ Furthermore, none of the three American bishops whom Nevill mentions seems to have left detailed reminiscences of the Conference. The one accessible extant source, Clarkson's brief account, does not mention Nevill.²¹ Nor does the detailed 1888 biography of Bishop Wordsworth, who supposedly encouraged Nevill to speak, portray the latter as an important figure.²² The only other New Zealand participant, Henry Harper of Christchurch, sent detailed updates to his diocesan newspaper throughout 1878. They give no indication that Nevill was playing a crucial role at the Conference.²³

Nevill's Account Became Exaggerated Over the Years

Despite the utter lack of corroborating evidence, one might argue that Nevill's account remains plausible because he claimed to be relying on his

1878 journal, a first-rate primary source. However, close scrutiny of Nevill's recollections reveals them to be inconsistent. His later reminiscences, which Evans seems to draw on quite heavily, talk at length about Nevill's heroic speech and the Americans' praise of him.

However, his 1878 journal is much less sensational. Although it highlights that Wordsworth persuaded him to speak against the patriarchate motion, it notes that very few participants had supported it to begin with.²⁴ This observation undermines Nevill's later claim that his defence of diocesan autonomy was of pivotal significance. And while Nevill's journal highlights that some American bishops expressed their support for him outside St. Paul's, there is no mention of him being declared the saviour of the Conference or of the Americans' excitability causing a scene.²⁵ Nevill's lengthy address to the 1879 Synod of the Diocese of Dunedin regarding his time in Europe also contains no mention of these events.²⁶ It seems unlikely that Nevill, in his immediate post-Conference reminiscences, would have neglected to mention such noteworthy events.

Nor does his posthumously published autobiography, which Nevill appears to have revised with great care shortly before his death, discuss these events. Indeed, its whole tone is rather nebulous (albeit still celebratory), which suggests that Nevill – or perhaps his nephew, Canon E. R. Nevill, who edited it – took heed of Davidson's warning that controversial claims might be formally called into question by his fellow bishops at Lambeth.

Conclusion

This paper does not seek to diminish Bishop Nevill's many verified accomplishments. However, he was not infallible, and in old age he seems to have misremembered this episode. The most important primary sources, including the 1878 journal, do not support Nevill's claims.

Therefore, it is almost certain that Nevill was not the saviour of the 1878 Lambeth Conference after all.

Endnotes

¹ W. M. Jacob, *The Making of the Anglican Church Worldwide* (London: SPCK, 1997), 236.

² *Ibid.*, 237.

³ This account is articulated most expansively in Samuel Tarratt Nevill, Notebook (c. 1919), Bishop Samuel Tarratt Nevill Papers (c. 1870–1919), MS–0161, Hocken Library, Dunedin, sec. ‘1878’ (hereafter: Nevill Papers).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Alan M. G. Stephenson, *Anglicanism and the Lambeth Conferences* (London: SPCK, 1978), 64.

⁷ John H. Evans, *Southern See: The Anglican Diocese of Dunedin, New Zealand* (Dunedin: The Standing Committee of the Diocese of Dunedin, 1968), 87–89.

⁸ Samuel Tarratt Nevill, Notebook (1878–1879), Nevill Papers, MS–0165, Hocken Library, Dunedin.

⁹ Letter from Davidson to Nevill, 17 December 1907, Davidson 430, Lambeth Palace Library, Lambeth, fol. 15 (hereafter: Davidson 430).

¹⁰ Letter from Nevill to Davidson, 8 February 1908, Davidson 430, fol. 16.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, fol. 19.

¹² Letter from Davidson to Nevill, 10 April 1908, Davidson 430, fol. 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*, fol. 21.

¹⁴ Letter from Nevill to Davidson, 3 June 1908, Davidson 430, fol. 26.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Letter from Davidson to Nevill, 27 July 1908, Davidson 430, fol. 27.

¹⁸ Samuel Tarratt Nevill, *Samuel Tarratt Nevill, First Bishop of Dunedin, 1871–1919, Primate of N.Z., 1904–1919: With a Short History of St. Paul’s Cathedral, Dunedin*, ed. E. R. Nevill (Dunedin: Otago Daily Times and Witness Newspapers), 77–81. For an example of an obituary, see ‘Obituary: Bishop Nevill,’ *Evening Star (Dunedin)*, 29 October 1921, 4.

¹⁹ ‘Anglican General Synod,’ *Evening Star (Dunedin)*, 27 April 1922, 5.

²⁰ Randall T. Davidson, *The Lambeth Conferences of 1867, 1878, and 1888. With Official Reports and Resolutions, together with the Sermons Preached at the Conferences* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1889).

²¹ On Clarkson’s brief account, see *Omaha Evening Bee*, 23 September 1878, 4. Many thanks to Jo Behrens, archivist of the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska, for sourcing a copy of this newspaper.

²² John Henry Overton and Elizabeth Wordsworth, *Christopher Wordsworth: Bishop of Lincoln, 1807–1885* (London: Rivingtons, 1888).

²³ ‘Home and Foreign News,’ *New Zealand Church News*, September 1878, 121–122; ‘Home and Foreign News,’ *New Zealand Church News*, October 1878, 137–138; ‘Diocesan Synod,’ *New Zealand Church News*, November 1878 Supplement, 2–3.

²⁴ Nevill, Notebook (1878–1879), 34. Note that page numbers have been added by me for clarity.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁶ *Proceedings of the First Session of the Fifth Synod of the Diocese of Dunedin, 1879* (Dunedin: Otago Daily Times Office, 1880), 5–14.