William Palmer


Published in:
Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

Open Access
This research has been made openly available by Queen's academics and its Open Research team. We would love to hear how access to this research benefits you. – Share your feedback with us: http://go.qub.ac.uk/oa-feedback
Palmer, William (1811–1879), theologian and ecumenist, was born on 12 July 1811, at the rectory, Mixbury, Oxfordshire, the eldest son of William Jocelyn Palmer (1778–1853), rector of Mixbury, and Dorothea Richardson (d. 1867), daughter of the Revd William Roundell of Gledstone, Yorkshire. Initially he was educated at home, then sent to Rugby School in 1823, together with his younger brother Roundell Palmer, later first earl of Selborne (1812–1895). William Palmer matriculated at Oxford on 27 July 1826, and was soon elected to a demyship at Magdalen College (a post he held until 1832). His proficiency in Latin gained him the chancellor's prize in 1830 for his poem 'Tyrus', and the university essay prize in 1833 for his 'Oratio de comoedia Atticorum'. He obtained first-class honours in classics, and graduated BA on 17 February 1831; in 1832 he was elected to a fellowship at Magdalen, a position he held until 1855.

From 1834 (when he proceeded MA) until 1836 Palmer served as the first classical tutor at the newly founded University of Durham, after which he returned to Oxford where, on 8 December 1836, he was ordained deacon. He was also appointed bursar of his college in 1836, and served as a university examiner in literae humaniores from 1837 to 1839. From 1838 to 1843 he was a tutor at Magdalen, and held the offices of prelector of moral philosophy (1842) and vice-president (1844). He is not to be confused with his contemporary William Palmer (1803–1885), theologian, of Worcester College, Oxford.

Palmer was best known for the controversial visits he made to Russia in the 1840s and 1850s, and for the contacts he made there with both ecclesiastical and lay officials. As an adherent of the Oxford Movement, to which he was drawn by the personality of John Henry Newman, he came to appreciate and advocate high-Anglican claims for the catholicity of the Church of England; this theological stance aroused in him an intense desire for intercommunion, particularly with the Orthodox church. He was also inspired by meeting various Orthodox Christians, both in Oxford and on the continent, including the Russian tsarevich (later Alexander II) in 1839. Finally he initiated plans for a visit to Russia, lasting from August 1840 to July 1841; the expedition was sanctioned by the president of Magdalen, Martin Routh (1755–1854), but it did not have the official approval of
the archbishop of Canterbury. Undaunted, and carrying letters of introduction from both Routh and Lord Clanricarde, the British ambassador to the Russian court, Palmer embarked on his journey.

Palmer arrived in St Petersburg with the intention of studying Orthodox theology and ritual, and thereafter being admitted to communion in the Russian church. He quickly realized, however, that his hosts did not sympathize with his views; indeed they met his claim to be a member of the Catholic (that is, universal) church with astonishment. In response to his desire for communicant status, he was told that he must submit absolutely to Orthodox doctrine and practice. In addition, the Russians were unsure whether Palmer could be regarded as an authentic representative and interpreter of Anglican teaching. Confronted with such an absolute rejection of all he had proposed, Palmer had no choice but to return to England, with his visit being judged—as an official level—as an utter failure.

On a personal level, however, Palmer did promote Anglican-Orthodox relations. He had the opportunity to converse with some of the major Russian ecclesiastics of the time (initially through the medium of French or Latin, and later in Russian), and introduced them to current theological debates in England. Some, like Count Protasov, chief procurator of the Holy Governing Synod, were unsympathetic; others listened more intently, but could still not concur with his theological stance. Among them was the under-procurator, Andrey Nikolayevich Muravyov (1806–1874), whose *History of the Church in Russia* Palmer edited and published in 1842; while Muravyov understood Palmer's motivations, he nevertheless believed that Anglo-Catholicism would find a better ally in Rome than in the East. Another enlightened contact was Metropolitan Filaret of Moscow (1782–1867), an influential, independently minded churchman who was deeply interested in Orthodox relations with the West. While Filaret treated Palmer with seriousness and respect, he too could not accede to his requests, because of doubts about his official status.

Palmer's most fruitful contact was with Aleksey Stepanovich Khomyakov (1804–1860), founder of the Slavophil school, whose members were openly critical of what they saw as the overly institutionalized nature of the Russian Orthodox church. Khomyakov approved of Palmer's desire for intercommunion, but, as a layman, could offer little practical assistance. Nevertheless he proved a willing correspondent over many years (1844–54), and instigated a widened range of contacts between the Church of England and the Orthodox. For his part Palmer assisted Khomyakov by publishing a number of Slavophil tracts in Britain. Their correspondence was eventually published by W. J. Birkbeck in 1895 as *Russia and the English Church during the Last Fifty Years*.

Palmer returned to Russia in 1842 with better credentials and a strengthened desire for intercommunion. The Russian synod again refused to negotiate on his terms, but welcomed his desire to take Orthodox communion, should his faith be considered acceptable. With a view to achieving this goal, he entered into a prolonged attempt to demonstrate Anglican-Orthodox doctrinal agreement, the
conclusions of which were eventually published anonymously as *A harmony of Anglican doctrine with the doctrine of the Catholic and Apostolic church of the East* (English edn, 1846; Greek edn, 1851). Palmer feared that his ideas would not be accepted by the Church of England hierarchy, and he therefore made overtures to the Scottish Episcopal church, in the hope that its synod might officially sanction his doctrinal assertions; he outlined these meticulously in *An Appeal to the Scottish Bishops and Clergy, and Generally to the Church of their Communion* (1849). When the synod met in September 1849 the appeal was dismissed, leaving Palmer in a state of disbelief.

In 1853, after several years of indecision, Palmer decided to seek admission to the Orthodox church—this time to its Greek branch; however he again experienced resistance, on account of his refusal to undergo an unconditional rebaptism (a requirement not imposed earlier by the Russians). Feeling exasperated with what he considered the failings of both Anglicanism and Orthodoxy, Palmer finally made the decision to convert to Roman Catholicism. After a period of retreat in Rome during January and February 1855 he was received into the Roman church on 28 February of that year. For the rest of his life he remained a devout Catholic, dividing his time between England and Italy, with occasional trips to Russia. When in Rome (where he usually spent the winter) he resided in the piazza Campitelli, undertaking extensive research in ecclesiastical history and archaeology, and publishing such works as *An Introduction to Early Christian Symbolism* (1859), *Egyptian Chronicles* (1861), and *The Patriarch and the Tsar* (1871–6). After succumbing to a violent cold in the spring of 1879 he contracted a lung infection, and died on 5 April 1879 at piazza Campitelli 3. He was buried in the cemetery of San Lorenzo in campo Verano on 8 April.

Throughout his life Palmer was renowned as a trenchant controversialist. To many of his contemporaries his theological views, private ventures, and overpowering desire for intercommunion might have seemed singular, even misdirected; but his sustained contacts with the Orthodox church—particularly his lengthy correspondence with Khomyakov—provided a firm basis for subsequent ecumenical advances. The significance of his endeavours was confirmed posthumously by his literary executor, John Henry Newman, who edited and published Palmer’s *Notes of a Visit to the Russian Church in the Years 1840, 1841*, in 1882.
Sources


W. J. Birkbeck, ed., *Russia and the English church during the last fifty years*, 1 (1895)


P. E. Shaw, *The early Tractarians and the Eastern church* (1930)


Foster, *Alum. Oxon*.


*The Times* (12 April 1879)


Archives

Birmingham Oratory, diaries, corresp., notes, and papers

Bodl. Oxf., prize verses and essay

LPL, corresp., journals, and papers

BL, corresp. with W. E. Gladstone, Add. MSS 44359–44527, *passim*

Bodl. Oxf., letters to Edwin Palmer and corresp.
Likenesses

J. Brown, lithograph, repro. in Palmer, Notes

Wealth at Death

under £12,000: probate, 12 May 1879, CGPLA Eng. & Wales

Archive Edition

View this article in the DNB archive

See also

Palmer, Roundell, first earl of Selborne (1812-1895), lord chancellor

External resources

Bibliography of British and Irish History <http://cpps.brepolis.net/bbih/incoming.cfm?odnb_id=21224>

National Archives <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/c/F69308>