

## Introduction

There were various aspects of Evangelicalism. There was the religious aspect, concerned with the Evangelical's own beliefs and incorporating an emphasis on personal salvation, reliance on the Bible, missionary endeavour and an uncompromising Protestantism. There was the moral aspect, deriving from the desire to strive for piety and righteousness in private and public conduct. And there was the social aspect, the result of the Evangelical's impulse towards benevolent and philanthropic activity.

G.B.A.M. Finlayson, *The Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury*

As yet no-one has properly evaluated Kilvert's character.

Frederick Grice, *Francis Kilvert and his World*

This book is the third in a trilogy that offers a revaluation of Francis Kilvert both as a man and as a writer. The assertion by Grice quoted above, though it dates from 1981, continues to be true. Much can be understood about the driving forces behind Kilvert's character and behaviour from Finlayson's analysis of Evangelicalism quoted above. The picture of Kilvert's background which emerged in the first two books of the trilogy has been substantially expanded in the third. One important result of this expansion is that it is now possible to recognise the elements which encouraged him to develop a vision of moral and material progress as he grew up. This entails a fundamental shift in the accepted view of him in which he appears naïve, lacking in confidence, parochial in outlook, and most at home in the country cottage or the country vicarage. Now we are able to see him as a man of sophisticated outlook, confident in the values he inherited, in touch with metropolitan culture and the urgent issues of the time, eager to enquire and to be informed.

*Kilvert's World of Wonders* also represents a fundamental shift in viewpoint because its predecessors laid almost exclusive emphasis on the diarist as a recorder of country life. My second book, *Kilvert's Diary*

*and Landscape*, was concerned chiefly with the countryside. My first, *Kilvert: The Homeless Heart*, focused on his relationships within the rural society of his Radnorshire and Wiltshire parishes. If anything it overstated his love of traditional society, presenting his diary as 'his hymn of love for old things' and as a desire to hold back change, although it also noted his 'ambivalent attitude to modernity'. Peter Conradi, in his recent evaluation of the diarist, made similar points: 'Kilvert has the tendency of all romantics to be tender towards the past'; like most romantics, he was also 'more equivocal' about the present. Conradi exemplified Kilvert's concern with the present by instancing his fascination with the electric telegraph and 'the new laughing gas used by his dentist'.<sup>1</sup> His ambivalence towards modern things has also been underlined by Karl Miller: 'Kilvert . . . could be intrigued by past times and old places . . . What generally compels him, however, is what is going on in Clyro in the 1870s – his here and now'.<sup>2</sup> My new book concerns Kilvert's here and now.

The first two books of my trilogy were written when only a partial exploration of Kilvert's background and of his reading had been undertaken. Thus his family's endorsement of industrial and scientific achievement and the involvement of his uncle Francis in Bath's Literary and Philosophical Association (BLPA), which provided lectures on science, natural history, astronomy, archaeology, botany, geology and literature, were barely glimpsed. Furthermore, Kilvert's admiration for the scientist John Tyndall had not been examined at all. The influence on Kilvert of the highly intellectual, charismatic Victorian preacher Frederick Robertson had been discovered but his strong interest in science was not explored in relation to the diarist. The significance of the fact that the latter was familiar with Brooke's *Life of Robertson*, which is a detailed, far-ranging critique of the writers, ideas and issues of mid-Victorian life, was not fully appreciated. Although *Kilvert: The Homeless Heart* acknowledged that Kingsley was a major influence on the diarist, account was taken only of his social, political and religious ideas; *Kilvert's World of Wonders* focuses on Kingsley's approaches to natural history, geology, sanitary reform and evolution. One of the reasons for arguing that *Kilvert's Diary* should receive greater recognition is that it is an invaluable account of life in mid-Victorian Britain. In its documentation of the tensions between tradition and change, inertia and progress, rural and urban/industrial, it is an incomparably rich source.

*Kilvert's World of Wonders* begins with the generation of his grandparents, who were young in the last quarter of the eighteenth century when massive social changes associated with the Industrial

Revolution were beginning to make an impact. People felt the strain on society caused by staggering increases in population and the growth of towns. The population of Britain grew from 12.5m in 1811, to 14.5m in 1821, to 21m in 1851. In 1801, the country's 70 largest towns contained 23% of the population, but by 1851 the figure was 34%. However, most people continued to live in the country and in small semi-rural towns until the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> While these changes brought their own problems, they also signalled an era of prosperity and power, of invention and discovery. Britain's foreign trade exceeded the combined total of that of France, Germany and Italy in 1870. In that year Kilvert began his diary, and it testifies to his pride in the country's booming trade as well as to other stirring national developments.

Asa Briggs's *The Age of Improvement* covers the years 1783 to 1867, the period (roughly) between the births of Kilvert's aunt Sophia (1789) and of his uncle Francis (1793) and the start of Kilvert's diary-keeping. The writings of his aunt and uncle illustrate clearly Briggs's observation that the period 1783 to 1867 cut into two contrasting centuries – 'the age of balance and the age of progress'. In the ensuing pages we shall see how Kilvert's aunt and uncle, in whose home he received most of his early education, struggled to make the adjustment from one age to the other, a difficult adjustment for them because, in addition to being born in the eighteenth century, they both had essentially eighteenth-century temperaments. 'Balance' was to a great extent what they stood for. Briggs chose his period because it was one of 'formative changes', when man was both 'fascinated and horrified by the "march" of events', divided over 'the merits of improvement'.<sup>4</sup>

*Kilvert's World of Wonders* is in many ways the story of the diarist's own class, which rose to political prominence as a result of the 1832 and 1867 Reform Bills. Bounded on one side by the traditional dominance of the aristocracy and on the other by the growing power of the working class, the middle class experienced competitiveness and insecurity, driven by the hope of rising socially and by the deep fear of sinking. Kilvert's family suffered bankruptcy and loss of fortune, and their sons had to make their way in the world. His family was strengthened, however, by its Evangelical faith, 'the highest virtue [of which] was self-improvement'.<sup>5</sup> The family benefited too from the fact that in the middle class there was 'a disproportionate number of Quakers, Unitarians, and dissenters with a strong moral sense, liberal political views, and independent outlook'.<sup>6</sup> The middle classes were often carriers of the very idea of improvement itself.<sup>7</sup> The Kilvert family emerges as a highly representative example of this

ethos. Though humble and relatively obscure, it yet had significant contacts, either directly or through intermediaries, with many leaders in the fields of science, literature, politics, exploration and humanitarian causes.

Over the last twenty years I have come to recognise a Kilvert who is more complex, more interesting, and altogether more important than the received picture of him, which shows a man of deep feeling but shallow intellect. The characterisation of him in the *DNB* as 'the poet who needed his solitary walks to admire and wonder at the power and splendour of the world God had made' reinforced other judgements that pictured him as quiet and retiring almost because he lacked confidence in his intellectual powers. Thus the received view of him creates a paradox – that of a moderate, conventional, dull, unintellectual clergyman with an undeveloped taste in literature, fit only for such rural backwaters as Clyro and Langley Burrell, but who somehow managed to produce a vibrant, passionate, and perceptive work of literature.

Critics have emphasised the fact that Kilvert's reading was indiscriminating and haphazard, that he favoured undemanding contemporary novels while avoiding the classics of fiction, and that this marked him out as a man with little real interest in books and ideas. Since the condemnation of Kilvert's reading over the years has not been supported by any analysis of it, it inevitably led to the conclusion that it must have been desultory and un-serious. My book *The Books that Kilvert Read*, which examined some of his choices, found that 'his reading had purpose, organisation, and encompassed writers and ideas that were far from trivial.'<sup>8</sup> That survey sought an understanding of his reading in its cultural context because only then could it be a guide to Kilvert's character and intellect. The present study has the same aim. It sets out not only to lay bare the pattern of his reading, and the reasons why particular writers, books and ideas figure in it in a mutually reinforcing way, but also examines contemporary reading forms and practices. We need to acknowledge that, for example, in Victorian times there was a continual 'two-way relationship between "minor" and "major" writers, the 'recognised giants' rubbing shoulders with melodramatic and sensational novelists. Victorian readers looked to novels of all kinds to 'live out the issues of the day', a motive that was partly responsible for Kilvert's choice of books.<sup>9</sup> We shall see that he was always reading something, that he lived in a milieu constantly informed by books, and that he had a highly developed cultural awareness. The following pages provide an opportunity to engage with a Kilvert who is excellent company and who has an incomparably rich story to tell.