

WILLIAM DYCE'S GEORGE HERBERT AT BEMERTON:
ITS BACKGROUND AND MEANING*

William Dyce's George Herbert at Bemerton (Royal Academy, 1861) presents the viewer with a multiple puzzle. It fits neatly into no convenient nineteenth-century category: it is not a pure landscape, not really a portrait, scarcely an historical panorama, not quite a narrative painting. Its style is curious: there is much attention to minute detail of foliage and a high degree of finish, but this is not really a Pre-Raphaelite work, for its subdued color removes it from the manner most typical of those artists. Allen Staley's comment that Herbert's pallor represents "a slightly quixotic attempt" to paint after the manner of an Elizabethan artist like Nicholas Hilliard¹ suggests an element of pastiche, but Dyce shows even less concern for modeling through paint than did the Elizabethan artist. Nor is it very helpful to try to place this work in the context of Dyce's other paintings, for his work was notably eclectic. To glance at the plates included in Marcia Pointon's recent biography of Dyce² is to see in rapid succession paintings and drawings in styles recalling Reynolds, Bellini, Raphael, Rembrandt, Titian, David, the Nazarenes, and a good many others. To a modern viewer, then, George Herbert at Bemerton may well seem an anomalous representation of a seventeenth-century poet and divine by a nineteenth-century painter who is remembered -- if at all -- for his work in art education, his part in the unfinished Arthurian frescoes in the Palace of Westminster, or his haunting later landscape paintings. One may, however, understand this painting more completely if it is set within a larger context that includes the religious controversies of the first half of the nineteenth century and Dyce's own involvement in them. In such a setting, Dyce's picture becomes much less a curiosity and much more clearly a part of the artist's own response to the ritualist controversies of the day.³

Two of the important groups within the ecclesiological controversy, the Tractarians of Oxford and the Cambridge Camden Society, looked to the past for models of present behavior. The young men of the Oxford Movement looked back primarily for doctrinal models and presented their findings in the Tracts for the Times (beginning in 1833) and made available the writings of the Church Fathers in a new edition. A few of the Oxford circle also wished to revive the liturgical practices of earlier days. One of them, Frederick Oakeley, became chaplain of Margaret Street Chapel, London, in 1839,

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