

John Relly Beard Lecture 1997



**The Life & Times of
John Relly Beard
(1800 - 1876)**

by Geoffrey Head, BA



Sponsored by The Ministerial Fellowship
General Assembly of Unitarian & Free Christian Churches

Feter Eckersley, Secretary of the Unitarian congregation at Dawson's Croft in Salford, awoke one morning in February 1825, conscious that he had an important letter to write. He had been directed to head hunt a Minister. In those days there was no General Assembly, no District Associations in the present day sense, there were no 'Guide Lines for the Ministry'; even the British and Foreign Unitarian Association was only in the process of formation. Doubtless the Unitarian grapevine worked as insidiously as it does today, but there were certainly no vacant pulpit lists. To add to Mr Eckersley's difficulties, he had the task of addressing a student at Manchester College, York - a student who stood out, even amongst such illustrious contemporaries as James Martineau, John James Tayler and Robert Aspland, for academic ability and missionary enthusiasm. The congregation at Greengate had not much to offer. It had, on the previous Christmas Day, opened its first modest building, but it was a poor and struggling cause in a working class area on the wrong side of the River Irwell, even though it had the benevolent interest and support of a number of grandees from the wealthy and prominent Cross Street congregation less than one mile away.

The student being head hunted, John Rely Beard, could well have had a choice of more prominent pulpits. The congregation stretched itself to offer a stipend of £120 p.a., probably with the help of such Cross Street worthies as Sir Thomas Potter, later to become first Mayor of Manchester, and Richard Potter, elected M.P. for Wigan after the passing of the Reform Act of 1832. The stipend was worth £7,200 in present day values, not inconsiderable at a time when 17 congregations in the Provincial Assembly offered less than £100 p.a. and 2 offered less than £40. Mr Eckersley's strongest card, however, lay in the character and sense of mission of the student and in the challenge offered. Both student and congregation believe fervently that the young Unitarian movement was essentially being guided by academically trained ministers serving well-to-do congregations and not speaking to the artisan and disadvantaged classes. This was to be the thrust of the new



www.unitarian.org.uk/docs

congregation led by a committed Minister. Beard found himself unable to resist such an invitation, accepted the call on 2nd March, 1825 and entered upon his duties in the summer at the close of Manchester College's academic year. It was a call that was to govern and direct the remainder of his life.

John Relly Beard was born in Portsmouth in 1800, the youngest of 9 children. His father, a small tradesman, was active in a small local Universalist society, which he had embraced in reaction to a Calvinist upbringing. John Relly was educated at a local grammar school, where a brutal disciplinary regime did not deter him from becoming a star pupil, but he had to leave in the trade depression at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. From the age of 16 he taught in the little Universalist tabernacle, but later moved to the Unitarian Church in the High Street, where the Minister was Russell Scott, uncle of the 'Manchester Guardian's' founder J.E. Taylor. This congregation, dating from the 1662 ejection, had influential adherents and finance was found to send Beard to a boarding school in France for a while: there he acquired a facility in languages which was to serve him well in later life.

In 1818 he entered Manchester College, then at York, under Charles Wellbeloved. There he was prominent in a vintage crop of students. He achieved academic distinction and won prizes, but his missionary urge was demonstrated by his taking the Unitarian message to outlying villages, where he preached to large assemblies in the open air, renewed the cause at Malton and built a small chapel at Welburn with the help of fellow student, James Martineau, who had had architectural training, as clerk of works. Withal he was no sobersides: at the College Martineau was known as the chief of the saints, whilst Beard, so far as Wellbeloved's draconian disciplinary code allowed, was the idol of the sinners. Both saints and sinners happily joined together in glee singing, Shakespeare readings and the production of the College magazine. They had not much scope for more adventurous pastimes. Wine was forbidden except on

prescription from a physician, dancing and billiards were prohibited and students entering the bedroom of a servant were fined five shillings.

Soon after entering into his kingdom at Dawson's Croft, Beard married Mary Barnes (a fellow worshipper in Portsmouth at the Universalist Tabernacle). It was a lifelong love match, but the joy of the wedding did not prevent them from a strict adherence to Unitarian principle. The ceremony, as then legally prescribed, took place at the parish church in Portsmouth, but the happy couple turned up the following day on the officiating clergyman's doorstep to hand over a signed declaration of protest "*against such parts of the service as imply our credence in the unscriptural doctrine of the Trinity*". This contrasts with William Gaskell, Beard's contemporary from the rather more relaxed congregation at Cross Street, who promptly departed with his bride, Elizabeth, for a month long honeymoon in North Wales after their wedding in 1832.

Back at the workplace, however, the idealistic young minister was learning his craft the hard way. His efforts were not without success and the congregation grew, but in the process began to move away from its roots. The Meeting House was judged inadequate and its surroundings unfavourable, so it was sold in 1835 and a new site acquired in Strangeways on the Manchester side of the Irwell, through the good offices of the Cross Street establishment. In the process dissension arose between the minister and his supporters on the one hand and a majority of the Trustees, drawn from Manchester's great and good, on the other. Beard resigned, but a congregational meeting by 50 votes to 21 asked him to continue. Harmony was not restored. The more powerful and wealthy withdrew from the support of the ministry and migrated to the new building, to which they had legal title, appointed a new Minister (Rev. William Mountford) and opened Strangeways Unitarian Chapel on 17 June, 1838. Numerically Beard's supporters were the stronger and they held together for some years as a happy and united people.

Succeeding events provide an interesting commentary on 19th Century Unitarian tensions. Mr Mountford could not stand the embarrassment of the situation and resigned in 1841. No successor was willing to enter into the situation and Strangeways closed its door after 3½ years. Beard's congregation considered it had a moral right to the property and the matter was submitted to a formal arbitration of distinguished Unitarians. Their award was a judgement of Solomon: neither of the parties was held to have exclusive rights, either party could be bought out for £300 and the Strangeways congregation was given first option. There were, however, substantial charges on the property; the maintenance of separate congregations was proving not to be viable and the Trustees offered to convey the property to new Trustees appointed by the Beard faction. The responsibility was accepted, but there was real financial difficulty from which the congregation emerged only gradually. The minister had in the process paid a heavy price, having to accept a considerable reduction in stipend. In 1843 the congregation could find only £45 and the position was further exacerbated in 1845 when the Chapel mortgage was called in - at that time mortgage and ground rent payments absorbed nearly two thirds of live income from subscriptions and pew rents. The situation was at last resolved when Unitarian friends in London, Liverpool, Birmingham and especially Manchester assisted the congregation to solvency.

Meanwhile Beard could manifestly not survive on his stipend, and from 1828 to 1849 he united the offices of schoolmaster and minister like so many of his predecessors and contemporaries. He built and set up a school 'Stony Knolls High School'. By 1840 he had 57 day and boarding pupils studying Classics, English, Science and Modern Languages, including many later to achieve eminence in Manchester professional and denominational life. Needless to say Mary Beard ran the domestic side of the enterprise. Ironically, in the light of Beard's doubts about the academic thrust of Manchester College's ministerial training, he prepared many aspirants for entry into that institution.

He was not, however, merely a ministerial pedagogue teaching to make ends meet. His Unitarian values and concern for the spiritual welfare of the underprivileged led him inexorably towards an essential concomitant - educational opportunities to enable them to break out of the mould of poverty and deprivation. His first major campaign was against the Manchester Grammar School, founded in 1515 for the education of the poor, but which had become an institution catering for the well to do and providing an arid classical curriculum. Beard, without financial resources of his own, enlisted the aid of Cross Street Unitarians, Sir Thomas Potter and Mark Philips MP for Manchester, who fought a case in Chancery for no less than 15 years against the Grammar School Trustees. They lost but in the process the Trustees had been pressurised into making significant reforms. His pen became increasingly active and in 1837 he founded the Manchester Society for Promoting National Education followed two years later by the Lancashire Public Schools Association. Significantly, their base was in Cross Street opposite the Chapel, the members of which were working in the same field. The problem addressed can best be expressed in Beard's own words, "*One half of the nation unable to read or write, our goals and poorhouses full, and a large proportion of the population vicious, criminal or destitute*". He attacked the failure, both of churchmen and dissenters, to provide popular education. His arguments foreshadowed many of the landmark features of Forster's Education Act of 1870, which was suggested and in the main drafted by two members of Beard's pressure groups.

Not content with being an educational activist in a political context, Beard was concurrently providing the tools by writing a bewildering variety of books designed to introduce those of little means to culture and thought. Titles included 'Latin Made Easy', a 'Dictionary of the Bible'. Cassell's Latin Dictionary still includes an acknowledgement to its original compilers, John Rely Beard and his son, Rev. Charles Beard. He was omnipresent in the denominational press. He founded the 'Christian Teacher and

Chronicle' in 1835 - popular in style and reflecting the new temperance and domestic mission movements. His 'Foreign Quarterly Review' circulated widely in England and the continent. He was one of the first editors of the 'Unitarian Herald' (1861-89), which circulated among the growing congregations in the industrial areas before its absorption into 'Christian Life'. He contributed to other Unitarian publications, including 'The Inquirer', then regarded as the organ of the conservative school in the movement, and to influential non-denominational papers such as the 'Westminster Review'.

In this welter of educational and literary activity it might have been expected that his basic ministerial calling would have been put on the backburner. Certainly, he had his ups and downs. As an individualist he did not always allow for people seeking the same end in different ways. He had 10 children, of whom 3 died in early childhood. Additionally, he took in relatives and members of his congregation, as in his view 'charity began at home'. So he never had enough money. It is heartbreaking to read his letters to Manchester College and charitable institutions, cancelling his generous subscriptions when times were hard and then promptly renewing them when his fortunes turned for the better. Nevertheless, his income from teaching and writing did give him a certain independence. As his congregation built up, it responded by increasing his stipend in 1849 to £210 (about the level of our current GA scale, although there is no evidence that he never had a manse allowance). Unhappily the stipend was not always paid promptly. The congregation grew. At Dawson's Croft he had by 1832 founded an infants' school with 140 pupils. By 1835 his Sunday School had 300 students. Later in the Strangeways Church (which seated 700) there were created a Fellowship Class, a Bible Class, Library and many other enterprises. Beard taught the 3Rs and visited the poor. During the Cotton Famine sewing classes for 100 girls were instituted and soup kitchens for families provided. Clothing was distributed to the needy. On the silver jubilee of this ministry in 1850 the celebrations were attended by a great assembly of worthies from

Manchester and wider denominational circles as well as the congregation, 350 in all - an account of the proceedings took 6 columns of 'The Inquirer' and numerous gifts were presented, including a purse of £100 (£6,000 in modern currency).

The Chapel in 1850 was in fact comparatively prosperous, but undeniably it had taken on many characteristics of the typical middle class Unitarian congregation of the 19th Century. When Martineau preached the Anniversary sermons in that year, a string of carriages extended from the Chapel to the crown of the river bridge. Richard Cobden, the Anti-Corn Law MP (who was present on that occasion) exclaimed "*Surely we have found the carriageway to heaven?*" So it is legitimate to ask to what extent Beard's initial aspirations to take his message to the artisans and the unprivileged had been realised. To answer this it is appropriate, briefly, to turn aside to the phenomenon of the Unitarian Methodist movement.

This movement derived from Joseph Cooke, a Methodist lay preacher, who had adopted Unitarian views and been cast out. It took root in Rossendale and adjacent areas, owing its organisation to Methodist practice, its piety and zeal to John Wesley and its belief system to Unitarian thought. Its preachers, like the Apostles Peter and John, were unlettered men who gave themselves to their ministry. The proximity of this movement to Dawson's Croft may well have influenced Beard in his acceptance of his call. In fact his new congregation had affiliated to the Unitarian Methodist Union in 1824, although there is no evidence that its connection with the movement was anything other than nominal and supportive. Beard endorsed the appointment of working men such as the Rossendale preachers to the Ministry, but he wanted to give them training to equip themselves for the work. He quickly involved himself in that work. In 1829 he preached twice at Padiham to congregations of 300 and in the open air to gatherings at Downham, Newchurch and Rawtenstall. These contacts reinforced his conviction that the Unitarian message must be taken to the deprived classes and that ministers were urgently required for this specific task. He engaged himself vigorously in local

missionary societies in Lancashire and Cheshire and extending into Derbyshire. Meanwhile he was moving towards the objective for which his life since his student days had been a preparation - the creation of a seminary to increase the supply of Ministers to Unitarian pulpits. By the early 1850's there were 30 vacant pulpits and in Beard's view many churches would close before the end of the century because of lack of ministers. Manchester College was a free College of Theology not bound to a particular denomination with a staff not necessarily Unitarian.

As early as 1835 Beard had said "*The taste had degenerated into fastidiousness. If the poor are to receive the gospel at their hands, there must be a change. Unitarianism will not spread extensively among the people till the people legislate for themselves and have preachers from among their own ranks.*" Joseph Kay, in his 'Social Conditions and Education of the People' 1850, had asserted that in Lancashire there was not one workman in 10 who ever entered a church and even fewer who attended regularly. The Unitarians, pioneers in the Domestic Mission movement in the 1830s, had quickly found that they were hampered by want of the right sort of Ministers for the task. John Ashworth, a Methodist Unitarian leader from Rossendale, appointed to serve the Manchester Domestic Mission, had been appalled at the task of ministering to the urban poor, whose condition was worse even than that of the destitute handloom weavers of more rural areas. Yet there was opposition. Many Unitarians did not think that theirs was a gospel for the common people. Thomas Belsham said "*They think that we shall degrade the cause and put ourselves on a level with Methodists.*" The magisterial voice of Beard's friend and former fellow student, James Martineau, asserted that he did not expect the Unitarian denomination ever to acquire a steady hold or exercise a wide influence over the uneducated masses of English society - therefore it should try to influence men of culture and not attempt to compete with the popular sects. Beard, the convinced missionary and popularist, disagreed - "*Ours is essentially*

an aggressive attitude", he said, "*We go forth against error, superstition, sin and misery.*"

Rev. William Gaskell, Minister of Cross Street, was of a very different disposition to John Rely Beard and his congregation, whilst radical in social action, was far less denominationally orientated. Yet both men were outstanding ministers, their attributes were to some extent complementary and they enjoyed a longstanding relationship of friendship and trust. By the end of 1853 Beard and Gaskell had decided the time was ripe for a forward move and a circular was issued. With the support of local prominent laypeople and the goodwill of leading Unitarian figures, there was a gathering in the Cross Street Chapel Room - where in 1786 the Manchester Academy had been founded - and the Unitarian Home Missionary Board was inaugurated. Beard was appointed Principal and Theological Tutor and Gaskell was appointed Literary Tutor, a role that he had filled at Manchester College between 1846-53, when it removed to London. The relations between the older foundation and the Home Missionary Board were certainly not competitive - John James Tayler, Principal of Manchester College, sent his good wishes at the foundation of the Board. Gaskell himself served both as Chairman of Committee at MCO from 1854 concurrently with his tutorship at the Board until his death in 1884.

The founders of the Board were by no means inclined to spend money on the purchase or erection of buildings. Classes were held at the homes of Beard and Gaskell. The first students were ten in number and drawn from the artisan and lower middle classes. Mornings were devoted to lectures, afternoons to pastoral visitations. The curriculum was varied and rigorous. It was certainly not unambiguous - one course covered 'The History of the World with special reference to the History of Civilisation'.

Beard's twenty years tenure as Principal securely laid the foundation of the institution and marked out future policy. He had attracted considerable endowments, enlarged and

improved the curriculum and formed a close association with Owen's College, soon to become the Victoria University of Manchester. With Gaskell's Cross Street congregation he had built the Memorial Hall in Albert Square as a home for the Missionary Board. On his retirement an address from his old students noted that "*It was your desire not to multiply inferior copies of yourself but to stir us up into independent thinkers.*" - an encomium to warm the heart of any Unitarian teacher. 'The Inquirer', however, continued to be unimpressed with Beard's objectives. In 1867 it averred that it had "*no faith in the prevalence of our views amongst the less cultivated classes, it was folly to ignore social distinction. The Ministry as a whole should become the social and intellectual aristocracy of our church - on a social level with the best families amongst us.*" Victorian Unitarian elitism was still alive and well.

During the first ten years of the Home Missionary Board's life Beard combined his Principalship with his ministry at Strangeways, but this did not prevent him from continuing active involvement in radical social causes. Never aspiring to active political office - he left that to his laypeople - he exercised an active influence in many spheres. He was a member of the Anti-Corn Law League. He was consulted by MPs on political questions such as the Dissenters Marriage Act and used them to propagate his own ideas and causes. He supported disestablishment of the Church and political enfranchisement of the masses. He was summed up as an "*anti-war, anti-slavery and anti-capital punishment man to the backbone.*"

So we have a picture of an active denominational propagandist, an ardent and practical educationist, a radical in the social responsibility field, a caring pastor - but what of his qualities as a Preacher and a theologian, attributes much sought after by the Victorians and even now near the top of a congregation's shopping list when seeking a new Minister? Well, the evidence is mixed as to his preaching ability. His denominational stature brought him numerous invitations to pulpits, where his sermons were esteemed by the committed despite their length. In 1851 he preached at Horsham for

1¼ hours on the subject of 'Faith'. In 1847 he had the honour of preaching the annual B & F U A sermon at Hackney. There was criticism that his thoughts and ideas were communicated in a slow and monotonous tone with little gesture and were too long. At Strangeways he had the habit of hanging on to a subject that took his fancy, prolonging it into a series of sermons over several weeks. He preached on the 'Atonement' for six weeks successively and delivered entire courses on 'The State of Society at the Advent of Christ' and 'The Doctrines and Principles of the Roman Catholic Church'. Yet we know of his great acceptance when addressing large gatherings during his student days in Yorkshire and later amongst the Rossendale Unitarian Methodists. It would appear that he took on the colour of his surroundings. Amongst the unlettered he was fired by his missionary enthusiasm and he spoke simply, in the language of the people. In a conventional pulpit his academic training and interests asserted themselves. Certainly at Strangeways he used his pulpit to project doctrinal and controversial subjects intended for publication and to defend Unitarianism from the attacks of the orthodox - a notable example lay in his verbal battles with Canon Stowell, a formidable Salford Anglican, who had a hearty dislike of both Jews and Unitarians. His leadership in prayer was generally esteemed - no 'Orders of Worship' man, his extemporaneous prayers were said to be terse and elegant in style, profound and earnest in feeling, emphatic and dignified in expression. The disciplines of his schooldays at Portsmouth and his training at Manchester College, together with contemporary Victorian attitudes were apparent. In Chapel he brooked no interruption and reproved noisy children.

Theologically, Beard could be termed a liberal conservative, never accepting the more advanced Martineau philosophy of religion. Yet difference in opinion did not impair friendships or reduce his commitment to toleration. In 1856, whilst actively combating Martineau's opinions, he refused to penalise him for heterodoxy or exclude him from a Chair at Manchester College. Beard was in fact no pathfinder in theology. He was a compiler, a

populariser. His command of languages enabled him to correspond with European theologians in French, German and Latin. Between 1832-76 he wrote and translated 38 volumes in religion and theology and another 22 in other subjects.

From 1854 to 1864 Beard filled the dual roles of Minister of Strangeways and Principal of the Unitarian Home Missionary Board. The Cotton Famine and his efforts to alleviate the conditions of the poor added pressures and strain. Commercial depression restricted recruitment to the congregation, various Chapel activities had to be curtailed. Beard suffered in health and he felt that a change of pastorate would be beneficial. His efforts to resign were, however, resisted by his appreciative congregation, but in 1864 he insisted: there was a gathering of 300 for his retirement occasion and a purse of £200 was presented. So ended a ministry of 39 years, but this remarkable man forthwith removed to the more rural surroundings of Sale and took on the ministry of the old congregation still meeting in very modest premises dating from 1739. This, for most people, would have constituted a gentle retirement pastorate, but not for Beard. Despite continuing his labours as Principal of the Missionary Board he saw the increasing suburbanisation of Sale and Ashton-on-Mersey as an opportunity for Unitarian growth. He set to raising funds for a substantial and beautiful church which was opened in 1876, the year of his death. He had retired owing to ill health two years previously from his Principalship of the Unitarian Missionary Board.

In his day John Rely Beard was amongst the most esteemed of all Unitarian ministers, but latterly his reputation and achievements have been overshadowed by those of some of his contemporaries. Certainly in personality he was both loved and respected. The 'Manchester Guardian' in its obituary clearly indicated that he was what we now call a 'workaholic'. Sanguine in temperament, he was adjudged resolute, genial in private life and a good conversationalist. 'Christian Life' referred to his simplicity of character. 'The Inquirer' endorsed these assessments, pointing out

that he was stern to the guilty, un pitying in denunciation of immorality, but welcoming to the repentant sinner.

Beard was esteemed as a pastor and as a practical philanthropist. As a writer his voluminous output precluded final polish. It would have been better for his personal reputation if he had written less, but in fact he sought no fame or literary success. His grasp of a subject was intense rather than wide. Few of his books read well today, but in their own time they put over the message which Beard intended. He was a scholar for whom the message, not the mode or polish of expression, was all important. His thrust was to speak to the heart of the people, to those who needed light and instruction.

His lifelong differences with his friend, James Martineau, are an expression of the two wings of 19th century Unitarian thought. They were encapsulated in 1834 when Martineau preached to the Provincial Assembly at Cross Street Chapel, the citadel of Lancashire Presbyterianism. In his Presidential role Martineau, at dinner, denounced the image of Unitarians as too sectarian, and not allowing sufficient latitude of theological sentiment. Chapels, rather than proclaiming a denominational name, should speak to men anxious to have their moral wants supplied. Beard could not resist the challenge. He went into print in the 'Christian Reformer', taking up a firm sectarian stand that the Unitarian name should be attached to organised religious bodies as well as to individuals - "*The theological world*", he said, "*would not admit of nondescripts*". Beard was also unhappy about Martineau's hymn book - he could not accept hymns addressed to Jesus. Yet, withal, mutual respect and friendship remained without diminution. Martineau, of course, outlived Beard as he did all of his Unitarian contemporaries and on Beard's death he wrote, "*Of all my former College companions, no one has less loitered on his way or left behind him the witness of more completed work.*"

If Beard was dogmatic in his denominational and theological convictions, he was pragmatic in the educational and social concerns which are, perhaps, his most enduring legacy. In these endeavours he had most success, but he leaned heavily on the members of the Cross Street establishment to achieve his results - in the words of Michael Turner, a non-Unitarian historian *"these were men of a tolerant and rational character. They were not strongly sectarian...tended to hold relaxed attitudes to doctrine, believing that one's conduct and lifestyle were more important than any rigid adherence to particular theological tenets. At Cross Street there was no doctrinal test on ministers and congregation. The atmosphere was liberal, tolerant and informal"*. It may also be remarked that they were wedded to a laissez faire economic philosophy - Mark Philips opposed the Todmorden Unitarian, John Fielden's introduction of the 'Ten Hours Bill' for mill workers. Yet the mission-orientated, sectarian John Relly Beard worked with them and through them to achieve many important social and educational objectives.

Equally significant was his close and harmonious relationship with the long serving Cross Street Minister, William Gaskell. Gaskell was equally distinguished academically, was more in demand as a preacher, published less apart from sermons, but had considerable literary gifts and was a well regarded hymnologist. Like Beard he was a workaholic, but more of a Committee man - in close touch with the power brokers of 19th century Manchester, rather than a hands on activist. Despite his novelist wife, Elizabeth's occasional concern for the adequacy of the Gaskell income, the Gaskell lifestyle was relaxed and they moved easily in intellectual, religious, literary and social circles. Beard and Gaskell differed in many ways, but they had complementary skills and on the whole mutual objectives.

It was Gaskell who preached the funeral address in the new Church at Sale created by John Relly Beard. He referred to Beard's association with prominent men to sweep away abuses and work for religious liberty and commercial freedom. He mentioned his friend's work for popular education and his advocacy of

disestablishment to liberate religion from state control. Beard, he said, *"did not fall into that false and shallow liberalism which made beliefs of no significance and treated them all as of nearly equal value"*. His missionary spirit had been the means of reviving some congregations and leading to the formation of others. He constantly added to his stores of knowledge and would have achieved high office in the established church. Above all, he did not allow controversy to prevent him from doing full justice to his vision of the Ministry - he believed it to be the noblest office in which man could engage.

So John Relly Beard was laid to rest in Brooklands Cemetery just down the road from his new Sale church. He had battled long and valiantly. He can be an inspiration to both Ministers and laypeople as we approach the end of the 20th century, for the same problems are still with us. He thought that the Unitarianism of his time was elitist, intellectual and middle class, not reaching the artisans and people of little education.

His mission was to take his Unitarian faith to such people and, moreover, to ensure that they were enabled to have the benefit of education for their own betterment and to understand their religion. Thanks to Beard and people like him, Unitarians and others, there is now a greater level of educational opportunity, but do we see in our congregations today the sort of people Beard tried to reach? Institutional religion is, of course, generally in disfavour, but are we actively seeking to take our liberal message to a wider constituency? There is little evidence of this, whether one considers the make up of the average congregations or the profile of attenders at General Assembly meetings or scans the pages of 'The Inquirer'. We still have the dichotomy in our movement between the denominationally included and those who seek a broadening of our ethos: we have our UCA and our URG. Are we as ready to extend the same tolerance to widely differing points of belief as were Beard and Gaskell and Martineau in the last resort? There are still the problems which Beard addressed of social responsibility, of war and peace. There remains the problem of any Minister being able to satisfy the typical

congregation's quest for a Man (or Woman) for All Seasons - the Minister as Preacher. Theologian, Social Reformer, Educationist, Administrator, Shepherd of a flock. Beard thought it was the noblest office: certainly it remains now as then one of the most difficult. Perhaps Beard did not succeed in everything he essayed, but he had a good try and lived up to the standards which he had set himself during his time as a ministerial student.

A coda to this tale. Whatever happened to those particular causes to which John Rely Beard dedicated his ministerial life? The Home Missionary Board is now, of course, the Unitarian College Manchester. It has, for some years, been associated with the inter-denominational Northern Federation for Training in Ministry - it no longer has its own buildings and in this sense it has returned to its roots. The Memorial Hall proved no longer tenable in modern conditions and was sold around 1970 - the funds were invested, the income is administered by trustees and supports Unitarian projects. And the congregations? After Beard, Strangeways had distinguished ministers, including people of the calibre of Brooke Herford. It remained true to its sectarian tradition - when the Manchester District was reconstituted in 1891 as a representative association, Strangeways refused to join under its title as the 'Manchester District Association of Non-Subscribing Churches'. It came in the following year, when the name was changed to the 'Manchester District Association of Presbyterian and Unitarian Churches', a nice compromise between the Old Dissent of Cross Street and the sectarianism of Strangeways. The Strangeways locality was, however, experiencing demographic changes. It had become a centre for Jewish immigration from Central Europe. There was no longer the working class constituency which Beard had sought. The handful of professional and commercial men who had provided the organisational expertise to run the congregation had moved further afield. The 700-seater classical edifice could no longer be maintained and closed in 1903. The congregation moved to rented premises in Broughton until 1913 and finally succumbed during the pressures of World War I.

Beard's church at Sale flourished for a while but had a life of less than 100 years. Despite its location in a growing and prosperous suburb and having ministerial care for most of the time, its congregation declined after World War II. It was kept in good heart by devoted officers who, in the 1960s, all moved away from the locality. They could not be replaced and the Presbyterian cause founded in 1699 came to an end. Beard's splendid new Church was demolished to make way for flats.

Perhaps there is one final lesson. Times change, localities change. Nothing is forever. The life and dedication of people like Beard can inspire us, but their commitment has to be continually renewed by succeeding generations of leaders, both ministerial and lay, and these leaders need to be trained and infused with his spirit, his self-sacrifice, his sense of purpose. Denominational growth, even survival, depends on such leaders. I think that even John Rely Beard would not dismiss that as an elitist proposition.

The ancient chapel at Cross Street built in 1694 was destroyed by enemy action in World War II. It was rebuilt in 1958-9, but the premises proved unsatisfactory for congregational, denominational and social witness. A third chapel on the historic site is to be open in late 1997. In it John Rely Beard and William Gaskell will be reunited. Rooms are to be named after them and the two oil paintings commissioned in honour of their work in establishing the Memorial Hall will find there a permanent home, as will the substantial stone font from Strangeways Chapel, the location of Beard's major ministry.



The Author

Geoffrey Head was born in Manchester, educated at Manchester Grammar School and is now retired from a senior position in H.M. Customs and Excise. His First Class Honours degree with the Open University had a profile predominantly relating to aspects of history and religion. He is a Past President of the Unitarian General Assembly and his numerous involvements in the Unitarian movement include service as Treasurer of the General Assembly, the British and Foreign Unitarian Association and Manchester College Oxford and as General Secretary of the Manchester District of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. He is the author of 'Unitarian in Manchester 1930-1988 Decline and Adaptation'.

Thanks

The author's thanks are gratefully extended to Judith Shiel and Rev. Ann Peart for facilitating access to the Unitarian College collection in the John Rylands University of Manchester Library and to Margaret Sarosi for access to the manuscripts and papers in the Old Library at Manchester Academy and Harris College Oxford.