

# MICHAEL KIMMIT: IN GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE

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*Lindsay Williams*

*He never wanted to leave his beloved Plas Gwyn, the quaint house on the hillside, where, from among the profound theological tomes of his library, he could look out eastwards to the sunrise and across the green hills and valleys of North Wales. It was like a kind of heaven on earth, where he gave himself, through his retirement years, to the study of God's Word and in so many ways to the support of the Reformed faith.*

Michael Kimmitt, the fourth editor of the *British Reformed Journal* and for many years editor of the Sovereign Grace Union journal *Peace and Truth*, passed away from this troubled world on 13 February, 2016, at the age of 87 years.

He was born of Irish descent in the English county of Hampshire in 1929, the eldest of four sons of Lieutenant-Colonel Kimmitt of the Royal Artillery. The exigencies of military life meant that he and his brothers were subject to the experience of moving home from one military base to another, on one occasion finding themselves in Gibraltar. Such difficulties for the upbringing of children in military circles were perhaps mitigated a little by having them educated at a boarding school. Michael and his three younger brothers attended Lancing College. In such an institution, it was inevitable that the four boys became referred to as “Kimmitt Minimus” for the youngest, followed by “Kimmitt Minor,” then “Kimmitt Major” for the next oldest and Michael was “Kimmitt Maximus.”

In those years of schooling immediately before and during World War Two, Michael followed a rigorous curriculum followed by two years of military national service. After this, he studied the Natural Sciences at Trinity College Dublin, again attending at the same time as all of his brothers. On graduation, he obtained a post as a bacteriologist for the famous HP Foods Company of Birmingham. Known also for HP sauce, baked beans, vinegar and tomato ketchup, this was the company famous for its ultimate take-over and produc-

tion of the world-famous Lea and Perrins Worcestershire Sauce. With HP, Michael spent his whole career, rising to become the Chief Bacteriologist in his mature years, by which time HP had been taken over by a French multinational food conglomerate, a move which brought about Michael's presence from time to time at the company's Gallic premises.

During his early years, his education and home provided him with a profound religious sense, doubtless accentuated by his attendance at the boarding-school chapel and association with the parish churches wherever he happened to find himself during school holidays. Somewhere to the south of Dublin city, there is an Anglican parish church which he insisted on visiting during a holiday there in 2007. I photographed him standing in front of the entrance gates. It was, he told me, the church where, in the years when he was a student at Trinity, he first experienced a lively quickening of his Christian faith, something that made Christ and the gospel mean more to him than anything else. It was never to leave him and was henceforth a marked feature of his life.

In those years of his youth, God's providence, as they say, smiled on him, and he met and married a young Christian lady, who was to bear him four children and prove herself to be truly an example of the woman extolled by Solomon in Proverbs 31. Nancy (nee Rees) was from a family located partly in Liverpool and partly in that very region of North Wales to which Michael took her when he retired from HP in the mid-1990s. A professionally qualified occupational therapist, an excellent cook, a superb home-maker and a talented amateur artist, she made their home a haven of peaceful fellowship and hospitality to so many Christians over so many years. Added to all this, she was active in a charity bringing aid to sufferers from Parkinson's disease.

Making their home in one of the suburbs of Birmingham, Michael and Nancy attended the Parish Church of St. John's at Harborne. In those days of the 1950s, one Dr. James I. Packer was a curate at Harborne and thus began an acquaintance that was profoundly to shape Michael's theological convictions in the mould of Reformation Christianity. In later years, a complete set of Dr. Packer's perceptive theological works was to be found on the shelves of Michael's library at Plas Gwyn. The celebrated theologian himself stopped off to visit Michael while on a visit back to this country from Canada about ten years ago.

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A faithful and diligent worker in the church at Harborne, Michael was elected as one of the churchwardens, a post which imposed upon him the heavy burden of legal responsibilities under Crown Ecclesiastical Law for the maintenance of the worship and the church premises at St. John's.

In those blessed times, the worship at St. John's was characterized by the sonorous gravitas and reverence of the old Anglican Prayer Book, faithful scriptural preaching and serious Christian discipleship. Days of heaven on earth indeed! "Lay up these my words in your heart," says Moses, "that your days may be ... as the days of heaven upon the earth" (Deut. 11:18-21).

Rare it is, however, that blue skies never grey over for some of the time at least, and gathering storms were beginning to threaten through the ensuing years of the 1960s and 70s. Domestically, the sad loss in infancy of one of their children was a source of profound grief to Michael and his growing family. It was at the very religious heart of their lives that serious trouble was to arise. Charismaticism had been running rampant through the previous two decades in all the major denominations of Christianity worldwide, and the Church of England itself was the very nurturing incubus for a particularly popular form of this phenomenon. To what extent the equilibrium of fellowship and theological unity at St. John's was disturbed by this "new light," we can only guess but we know that it was profoundly at odds with Michael's deepest convictions. His position as churchwarden, with all its legal as well as moral and theological responsibilities, meant that he was right in the front line of the conflicts generated by this insurgent novelty.

Many were heartbroken and began to leave the congregation, finding fellowship among some of the Baptist congregations of the city, but for those like Michael and Nancy, their belief in infant baptism and the Reformation standards meant that they could never settle in one of the old nonconformist chapels. With a few others, deeply grieved, somewhat marginalized in their congregation, and at a loss, they felt there was no other recourse for them but to leave St. John's and begin an entirely new congregation that would, in its worship and theology, adhere to the standards they had grown to love and respect.

So it was that, in October 1982, a small group of just three or four families bonded together to form Edgbaston Reformed Church. Michael was to play

a leading role in the organization and administration of this small group for the next eleven years of its existence. Meeting in a hired school hall in the mornings and in a hired Quaker Meeting House in the evenings, the Sabbath services were maintained largely through the ministry of visiting ministers and lay-preachers. In its early years, Rev. John Brentnall of Derby lent great support to the little group. Under his leadership, door-to door evangelism was carried out in the surrounding district, which generated hostile results from some quarters and some small degree of progress in others. Notably, students from Birmingham University, many of them Koreans, attached themselves to the meeting. English and Dutch visitors coming to the services could find themselves in Michael and Nancy's home after the morning service being fed with a sumptuous lunch in the delightful Christian company of several of these Koreans.

So the little congregation grew and, although it survived only eleven years, they were eleven fruitful years. During this time, two young couples who joined the fellowship so matured in their knowledge and commitment to Christ that they answered the call to ministerial service. First, were Keith Watkins and his wife Elizabeth, whose subsequent labours on the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland Mission Fields of East Africa were extensively blessed of God. Then, in the later years of the fellowship, Iain Budgeon (supported faithfully by his wife, Sonya, and his two children) went on to enter the ministry of, first, the Church of England (Continuing) at Wolverhampton and, later, the Free Presbyterians of Scotland. Another young and devout family moved to North Wales and enrolled in an Evangelical Church in Penrhyndeudraeth, and an older widowed lady actually went out to Sao Paulo in Brazil to spend several terms there working with an evangelical mission.

Through these years 1982-1993, Michael was also active with the Sovereign Grace Union and, for some time in this period, was the editor of the Union's magazine *Peace and Truth*. Involvement in this organization brought him into contact with many Reformed believers throughout the rest of the country, especially with Mr. Tony Horne, who during those years was working to revive and promote Reformed and Presbyterian beliefs throughout England. This acquaintance eventually brought him into contact with Professor Herman Hanko and Rev. Gise Van Baren of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America. In 1989, the two Americans were guests at Michael and Nancy's

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home in Edgbaston, and conducted worship and preaching there while on a tour of several places in the United Kingdom. This contact was to develop in the years to come in a particularly salient fashion. The very next year, in the summer of 1990, under the chairmanship of Rev. Van Baren, the inaugural meeting of the British Reformed Fellowship (BRF) was held, organized by Michael and his friends at the very Quaker Meeting Hall they had been using on Sabbath evenings since 1982. Michael was one of the first to enrol in the membership of this new organization. He immediately lent his skills, time and knowledge to its furtherance, such that he was elected to the BRF Committee at the general meeting held in Northern Ireland in 1992. This development led to him making a profound acquaintance with a group of Christians from Northern Ireland who were making a similar stand for the Reformed faith and who were the nucleus from which the present Covenant Protestant Reformed Church (CPRC) at Ballymena was to grow.

Sometime about 1992, great changes overwhelmed the little gathering at Edgbaston. Some of the elder stalwart members had retired and had returned to their native districts of Britain to enrol in churches there; one had passed away; a few young couples had left, with pressures of employment forcing them to move away; and the supply of Korean students eventually came to an end. Despite sterling efforts by Michael and Rev. David Blunt, then a Free Kirk student on loan, Edgbaston Reformed Fellowship was coming to the end of its viability. It was formally closed in Spring 1993 by Rev. John Brentnall.

About this time, Michael decided to retire from HP foods. He threw himself into Christian work via the BRF and his latest venture, which was to emerge as K & M Books, in collaboration with a Calvinistic Baptist minister, Rev. Alan Morrisson. Some of us wondered at the time just how the firm took the name *K & M Books*. Did the K represent “Kimmitt” and the M represent “Morrisson”? On enquiry, we were told “No,” but we were not told what the real interpretation was. One wonders if the K and M derive from the “Kimmitt Maximus” of Lancing College days! The firm’s first publication was ambitious, a 400-odd-page paperback under the title *The Serpent and the Cross*. Written by Rev. Morrisson, it was an exposé of the extent to which witchcraft and spiritism had infiltrated the life of our nation and our churches, and the effects of this on our culture and religious beliefs. It made gruesome, creepy reading but was effectively a handbook for understanding much of what was turning

our hitherto Christian culture into something Satanic. Amazingly, despite K & M books not having direct access to Christian and other bookshops via an infra-structure of sales representatives, the heavyweight tome sold right out of its 3,000 print run and had to go to a later limited hardback reprint to satisfy further demand.

Michael undertook in those years the colossal task of mastering the basics of both New Testament Greek and classical Hebrew. He must have been a “glutton for punishment” to do this but he was dedicated to his task. He actually managed to get his old Amstrad computer programmed to print in Greek and even backwards in Hebrew!

Visitors to his home in Edgbaston could not fail to notice the prettiness of the gardens around Michael’s house. Both he and Nancy were keen gardeners, with Michael reserving a large slice of the garden at the far end for his vegetables and soft fruit. With such healthy exercise, he juxtaposed the intense concentration of his studies together with his publication business and work in various Christian organizations. One is reminded in this of the persistent discipline of the ancient monks, who likewise interspersed their studies with wholesome labour.

Struggling, however, over where now to find satisfactory means of worship in the Birmingham area, he and Nancy decided ultimately to sell up and move to an area in North Wales where Nancy had been evacuated during the war and where she had spent some years of her girlhood in the company of her aunts. The aunts were still there and were approaching their nineties. Typical it was of Nancy that she wanted to be near those who had looked after her so often in her childhood and to be on hand to help them in their old age.

In late spring 1995, Michael moved to the village of Trelawnyd, to the house called by the Welsh name: Plas Gwyn. On a hillside looking southeastward to the dawn over the valley below and across a long vista of hills and a valley extending away some ten or more miles to the south, the place seems like a dream come true. Nearly two tons of theological books Michael then organized on new shelving in the room chosen as his study/library, from which he could look out straight on the glorious view that stretched before him. No wonder he never wanted to leave there! And, of course, the place was replete with pretty gardens and a big vegetable patch!

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But an even bigger bonus arising from this move was Holywell Evangelical Church a few miles away, where the ministry of Rev. John Thackway was proving to be a stalwart upholding of the old biblical gospel. Enrolling in this congregation, Michael intimated that both he and Nancy felt that at last they had found a spiritual home.

Time flies and flies faster when you are happy. They were by now grandparents. Their two daughters, both Christian believers, had made good marriages and good careers, while their son, also a Christian, soon to marry a young Christian lady, was on the way to success in the electronics industry. So nearly twenty years would fly by for Michael, in which time he continued his work with K & M books, publishing further useful Christian literature, with the BRF as editor of the *British Reformed Journal* and as an active member of the church at Holywell.

It was in the church at Holywell where Michael found such great help and solace when his beloved Nancy was taken seriously ill and passed away to Christ in the summer of 2002. One feels that Michael was never again the same, his loss being felt most acutely. Nevertheless, he soldiered on at Plas Gwyn, now having to bear the burden of maintaining the house and his everyday wants alone. With great encouragement and help from the good people at Holywell, he was able to carry on for nearly another fourteen years, during which the sorrows and pains of old age began to take their toll on his physical health.

From the window of his study/library, one looks over the village of Trelawnyd in the valley below right over the very place where lay the parish church and the churchyard, where, first Nancy was laid to rest in 2002, and this year, after a long battle with illness, Michael's mortal remains were also laid. Together they await the Day of the Resurrection, when God will wipe away all tears from our eyes. Together their mortal bodies lie in that valley, where the green mountains sweep southward towards the sunrise where one is reminded of the words of a Welsh poet: "*Thou valley embrace me ... And Ye mountains enfold me ...*"

"Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints" (Ps. 116:15).

Till the day dawn and the shadows flee away.