

The Fight for the Reformed Faith

John Owen

Bulwark against Arminianism

Part One

Sometime about the year 1628, a young boy, but twelve years of age, entered the stately portals of Queen's College, Oxford University, to enrol as a student.

Enrol as a student! At twelve! At Oxford! Most intelligently gifted mortals find such a step something of a titanic struggle at the age of eighteen, let alone twelve. What kind of genius was this, clad in the child's garb of 17th Century England?

His father was the Puritan vicar of Stadham¹, a clergyman of Welsh descent, bearing the name "Owen", and whose ancestry can be traced back to Gwegan ap Ithel, Prince of Glamorgan. Apparently, there is evidence that the ancestry can also be traced back further, as far as Caractacus, the famous ancient British chieftain.²

Doubtless, the young covenant child, John, was pursued by the prayers of his godly parents as he entered through those august portals, no doubt awestruck by the majestic surroundings that were to become his academic alma mater. Did he echo that childhood awe, we wonder, when, in later life, penning his "Epistle to the Reader" at the introduction of his famous treatise "The Death of Death", he was to say : "Reader, if thou intendest to go any farther (into this book), I would entreat thee to stay here a little.....I desire a few words *in the portal*..."³

If he could have known little on that day concerning what in God's sovereign providence was ordained for him in the years to come, he nevertheless lacked nothing in delight and determination with his studies, and his whole University life.

¹ Known today as Stadhampton, situated some 10 kilometres south east of the City of Oxford.

² Cf. **Schaff-Herzog**: *Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge*, in loc.

Also: Cf. **Paul Fahy**: *Modern Celtic Spirituality* p.8. (St. Matthew Publishing Co. Cambridge 1996), where it is noted that Caractacus was the Roman name for the Welsh Caradoc. This Celtic King dates c.a. mid 1st cent AD.

³ **Works** Vol. 10 p.149. All references to Owen under the title "Works" herein refer to the Goold edition of 1850, reprinted by the Banner of Truth 1965 and onwards.

Tragically, there appears to be a paucity of information about him during his University years, and no detailed and definitive biography was ever written.⁴ An Edinburgh minister, of the 19th century, Andrew Thomson penned the 92 page biographical introduction that prefixed Vol. 1 of Owen's Works in the "Goold Edition" of 1850, but he relies on Orme's work of 1826.⁵ The general sparseness of available information leaves us still somewhat groping, but it is possible to gain a worthwhile impression of the boy-student that entered Queen's College in 1628.

Lest one might think that University entrance requirements were of lower standard in those days than now, it must be remembered that Latin was the medium of instruction then, in all subjects, right across the board. At 12 years of age, the young John Owen must have had full mastery, in Latin, of the four basic linguistic skills necessary to facilitate adequate communication in any language, namely: Listening and reading; Speaking and writing. Each is a separate skill that the student has to develop by fervent study and practice. Interwoven with all this, is the necessary development of extensive vocabulary, and the powers of comprehension and expression. In educational circles these factors are known to be tell-tale tests of intelligence. Such is the force of the curse of tongues, that, in the main, the ability to cope adequately with a foreign language is a distinct, though not inevitable, marker of high intelligence. That the young Owen was at 12 evidently capable of Latin virtually to the equivalent of a modern degree standard in a foreign language suggests that his Intelligence Quota must have been drifting well above 150 and had doubtless not terminalized even then. It might be guesswork, but on what information there is available, Owen's IQ might well have terminalized in the region of 170 plus. The sheer depth and intricacy of his written works in later years, the vast scope of his Biblical, Classical, and Philosophic quotations and references, indicate an intellect of vast proportions, probably gifted with the faculty of eidetic imaging.⁶ Bearing in mind that the average normal child (approx. 60-70% of all children) attains a terminal IQ in the range 90 - 110, that the old grammar school system in England picked up pupils from about IQ 120 and up, (the top 15% approx. of the

⁴ The biographical material that exists is deplorably sparse. Twenty years after Owen's death, the famous American Puritan **Cotton Mather**, writing in his *Magnalia Christi Americana*, could say "that the church of God was wronged, in that the life of the great John Owen was not written". A scant biography was written by a Mr. Asty of London as late as 1723, forty years after Owen's death, and a more detailed assay was made by a Mr. Orme in 1826. Orme's biography of Owen was inserted in what was the FIRST attempt to publish the collected works of this Puritan giant, 143 years after his decease! Evidently, Owen had been largely forgotten in the ensuing years after his death, whereas the Works and lives of the "moderate Calvinist" (even Amyraldian) puritans like Calamy, Baxter, and Howe, were given priority for production all through the 18th century. A tell-tale sign, this, that marks the apostasy of later Puritanism, and the much-vaunted 18th century so-called "revivals".

⁵ Cf. **Works** Vol. 1 pXXII Banner of Truth Reprint of Goold edition, 1965.

⁶ *Eidetic Imaging*: known in common parlance as "photographic memory". It is thought to exist in perhaps only a few hundred people per million.

nation's children), and that the average University student of today has an IQ in the range 120-130, one can begin to appreciate the level of Owen's intellect. In fact, the IQ figures give a false impression of 'flatness', in that they suggest that a pupil of IQ 130 is only 30% more intelligent than the average child at IQ 100. Hidden in the scope of IQ testing is a logarithmic scale, which means that IQ 130 is probably better assessed as being more like 100% more intelligent than average. Certainly an IQ of 130 should get a student in sight of a First Class Honours degree, and in American educational circles IQ 130 plus is classified as "Very superior".

With an IQ in the range 150 - 170 plus, John Owen was undoubtedly a genius. This is reinforced when we compare Owen with other genius level scholars of his own times. Hugo Grotius, (1583-1645), the Dutch genius, scholar, philosopher, arch-Arminian theologian, and lawyer, who had impressed all Europe, had not entered Leyden University until age 16. Bishop Hall, famous Anglican and moderate Calvinist (1574-1656), had enrolled at Cambridge at the age of 15. And John Howe, (1630-1705) another moderate Calvinist, if not outright Amyraldian, regarded widely as one of the superior Puritans of his age, was not to enter Oxford until the "ripe old age" of 17, in the year 1647.

Owen enrolled at age 12.

No wonder they called him the English Calvin!⁷

On entry at Queen's, the youngster threw himself into his studies "with an intensity that would have unhinged most minds, and broken in pieces any bodily constitution except the most robust".⁸ With iron discipline the lad allowed himself but four hours of sleep per night, yet had the physical strength to follow regular athletic pursuits as well as extensive studies, and even took lessons on the flute from the celebrated flautist, Dr. Thomas Wilson, the favourite flute teacher of King Charles 1st.⁹ For nine years, the growing young man followed this rigorous schedule, attaining a tall physical stature, and, as far as our scanty resources can tell us, we find that in 1632 he attained a bachelor's degree, and in 1635 attained the masters degree,¹⁰ though Thomson records that it was at age 19 (in 1635) he "commenced master of arts".¹¹ What is evident is that along the way through those years Owen collected a first class capability with Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, to go with his Latin. To correlate all this with our modern curricula is difficult due to the paucity of data for Owen. But judging from the tremendous scope of his learning, we are

⁷ One hundred years earlier, John Calvin was, at 19, about to receive his Doctorate at Paris. Cf. Emmanuel Stickelberger "*Calvin*" (publ. James Clarke & Co, 1959) p.15. In his day Calvin was rated as probably the most intelligent man in Europe.

⁸ Thomson : *Life of Owen* in *Works* vol 1 p. XXIII.

⁹ Op cit. p.XXIV. In later life, Owen was to appoint Dr. Wilson as Professor of Music for the University of Oxford.

¹⁰ Schaff-Herzog, Op. cit., in loc.

¹¹ Thomson Op cit. p XXIX

probably on safe ground if we say that in the nine years 1628-1637 Owen achieved highest honours over an area of study that would today include an honours baccalaureate degree in philosophy and classics, then a baccalaureate in Divinity, and finally, a Master's Degree. The evidence in Owen's written works indicates that on top of all this, his knowledge of the labyrinthine Jewish Rabbinic works was enormous, and his acquaintance with the Greek philosophers, poets, and thinkers must have been equally extensive. His later ability to quote reams from these quarters indicates how closely acquainted he was with all this material, and how "photographically" his memory appeared to serve him.

But it was selfish ambition that drove him. To excel in the Academic world, to make a name, to obtain high preferment in the Church.....these were the motives that impelled his zeal. And, we may say, worldly wealth also had a prominent position on his agenda. Back in Wales, there was a rich uncle. With no heir apparent in his family, the uncle had named young John Owen to fill that place, on condition that he kept the uncle pleased with his worldly progress. And in the meantime, the rich uncle financed Owen's progress through University.

England was in a turmoil in those years. Jesuit led, the enemies of the Reformation were slowly getting a stranglehold on the nation. Arminianism was being injected, first surreptitiously, and then openly, into the main stream of the Church's theological teachings. The Church of England had become infested with Arminian Judases, who worked hand in glove, so to speak, with the secret machinations of the Jesuits to tilt England back in the direction of Rome. Faithful Calvinists had begun to suffer due to the "dirty tricks" tactics of a sodomite, son of a Reading clothier, one William Laud, who had begun to Romanize the English Churches once again.¹² In this flux of religious confusion and intrigue, Oxford University was caught up, and during those years John Owen was brought under religious conviction, about his state before God. Little details of God's dealings with his soul are available to us, but we do know that they were intense and protracted, extending over several years from his late teens in 1634 or thereabouts, until a little before 1642, when his first written work "A Display of Arminianism", was published.

Arminianism! It was cropping up everywhere, Jesuit driven, with a clear Romanizing orientation! At Oxford, as early as 1613, the theologian Walter Browne at Corpus Christi College was wallowing in the accursed heresy. An inventory of his library drawn up in that year, indicated the complete absence of English Calvinist writers like Perkins, and a main mass of over 500 volumes "tilted" against Calvinism, including notably all the works of Arminius, and most significantly, Ludovicus Molina's *Concordia* and Leonardus Lessius' *De Gratia*, being the

¹² For a scholarly exposure of all these intrigues, see the excellent monograph by Nicholas Tyacke, "Anti-Calvinists" *The Rise of English Arminianism c. 1590-1640*. (Publ. Oxford University Press 1987).

works of the then leading Romanist Jesuit writers advocating free will.¹³ Browne himself was closely associated with Laud, and also with Howson and Buckeridge, which trio specifically opposed the Calvinist teaching contained in the Lambeth Articles. Contemporary with Owen's later years at Queen's, in 1635, we find an obnoxious volume entitled *Five Pious and Learned Discourses* penned by one Robert Shelford, alumnus of Peterhouse College, University of Cambridge, and Rector of Ringsfield, in Suffolk. This work was so suffused with doctrinal Arminianism that it was being used in Ireland by the Jesuits themselves, no less, according to no less than Archbishop Ussher, who called the book "rotten stuff".¹⁴ As early as 1629, the year after Owen had entered Oxford, concerns about Arminianism were being discussed right up at Parliamentary level. In that year Sir Walter Earle argued in Parliament that "religion should take precedency over all other matters" so urgent was the situation, because of "Popery and Arminianism, joining hand in hand."¹⁵

The most public and prominent figure engineering this Romanist revival was Laud, who, according to the English historian Clarendon, was "rough of temper, impatient of contradiction, and arbitrary."¹⁶ Thomson describes him as being of "naturally arrogant and domineering spirit", and a "narrow-minded ecclesiastic." This evil man had access to the King, and had wheedled his way to great prominence in the Royal Court, where he was at once privy councillor and principal adviser of Charles 1st. From that vantage point he was forcefully steering Church and nation, back towards Rome. In March, 1628, he had endorsed, with his own hand, a Jesuit's letter sent to the Jesuit Superior, then resident at Brussels, outlining a report on the state of affairs in England. "We have planted the sovereign drug, Arminianism" the letter ran, "which we hope will purge the Protestants from their heresy, and it flourisheth and bears fruit in due season. For the better prevention of the Puritans, the Arminians have already locked up the Duke (of Buckingham's) ears, and we have those of our own religion, which stand continually at the Duke's chamber, to see who goes in and out: we cannot be too circumspect and careful in this regard. I am, at this time, transported with joy, to see how happily all instruments and means, as well great as lesser, co-operate unto our purposes. But to return unto the main fabric:- *Our foundation is Arminianism.* (Emph. mine HW). The Arminians and projectors, as it appears in the premises, affect mutation. This we second and enforce by probable arguments."¹⁷

¹³ Cf. Tyacke: *Anti-Calvinists* pp.65-66..

¹⁴ Tyacke; Op.cit. p. 53 citing Ussher's *Works* XVI.9 Tyacke gives an interesting summary of some of the "rotten stuff" in Shelford's book, see op cit. pp.53-56. Notable is Shelford's outright rejection of the voluminous Protestant literature that proved the Pope to be the Antichrist. No wonder the Jesuits made ample use of his book in Ireland!

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 135 citing *Commons Debates for 1629* pp. 18-19.

¹⁶ Cited in Thomson op cit. p. XXVI

¹⁷ Cf. *"The Hidden Works of Darkness"* p. 89-90 edit.of 1645, subsequent to the examination of

By a series of rapid preferments, Laud replaced the Duke of Buckingham as Chief Minister of State in the year 1628, when that apostate peer had been ‘eliminated’ by the assassin Felton. Buckingham had been an Arminian, and effectively had played host to the plotters, as indicated in the Jesuit report above.¹⁸ But Laud swept on to even further heights and honours, in 1633 he was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury. But prior to this, in the year 1630, the Calvinist Earl of Pembroke, Chancellor of the University of Oxford, died. It was Owen’s second year at Queen’s, and to the horror of the Puritan faithful, it was Laud who was elected to replace Pembroke as Chancellor. By 1631, Calvinism had been expunged from the “Oxford Act”,¹⁹ and soon the wicked prelate was pushing his Roman innovations throughout the whole University. As each year slipped by, the once Calvinist seat of learning and its host city slipped further and further towards the Vatican. Arminianism was the giant theological lever that was engineering this, undermining the solid doctrines of the Reformation, and softening up the Protestant masses for the planned Romanist *putsch* that lay ahead.

Struggling with the weight of his religious convictions, besides the weight of his studies, Owen must have ploughed heavily through his latter years at Oxford when Laud’s blasphemous influence was climbing towards its zenith. At any rate, Owen might have consoled himself, he had achieved high academic successes, and had been ordained to Holy Orders by Bishop Bancroft. The rich uncle back in Wales would still be pleased with him, and the money supply would still be there. But now his conscience hit him. Under conviction from the Word of God, he knew that he could not submit to the popish dictums of the evil chancellor, dictums that would ram down his throat all the Arminian and blaspheming ritualistic hell spawned from the pit itself.²⁰ But how to resist? The Arminians were ruthless, they would stop at nothing short of murder, if need be. Laud had all the machinery of the Star Chamber and the High Commission at his service, and his “cruel and malignant

Laud’s papers following his execution for high treason in 1644. Cf. “*The Complete Works of Augustus Toplady*,” p. 55, and for more details re. Laud, *Ibid.* pp. 251 ff. The *Schaff-Herzog* encyclopaedia gives Laud an extensive and eulogistic write-up, attempting to “sanitise” him. It extends to six columns as compared to four for John Owen! All concordant indeed, with Amyraldian editor Schaff’s own “Mercersberg” theology of “new Catholicism”. On Mercersberg theology, see article under that heading in “*A New Dictionary of Theology*” (publ. IVP 1988) p. 421.

¹⁸ On Buckingham, see Tyacke *op. cit.* and page 166, where his Arminian connections are listed. Laud’s name figures in this list, together with a cartel of other Arminian ‘nasties’.

¹⁹ Cambridge University had been overwhelmed by the Arminians by about 1629.

²⁰ Cf. Neal: “*History of the Puritans*” 3 vol edition of 1837 and Vol 2. ch. 5 pp. 286 ff., which details the indictments Parliament brought up against Laud. One finds there that Laud had carried out a nationwide purge against Calvinist books, whereas he “gave full license to Arminian literature. And at Oxford, besides introducing the Romish mass, vestments, altars, praying to the saints, confessions, and absolutions, crosses and liturgies, he insisted on transubstantiation, and insisted on being addressed by Papistic titles, e.g. “most holy father”. More, he issued revised editions of Cranmer’s old prayer book with the Calvinism expunged from it, so that Papists would not be offended by it.

spirit" was sleepless in its efforts to hound and destroy the Protestant faithful. In 1633 the famous London lawyer, William Prynne, for publishing a book against plays, dancing, masks, may-poles, festivals, etc., was arraigned before the Star Chamber. For his 'crime' Prynne was put from the bar and forbidden to practice law ever again, turned out of the society of Lincoln's Inn, to be degraded at Oxford, then to stand in the pillory at Westminster and at Cheapside, and to have an ear lopped off at each place, then to be fined £5000, and imprisoned for life. In fact, poor Prynne had his ears sawn off.²¹ At Oxford, Owen could scarce have avoided hearing about Prynne's fate, and the similar fates of countless more.

To a heart that has learned to fear God, all other fears fall into a secondary status. The fear of God, the "beginning of Wisdom" (Prov. 9 : 10) was John Owen's primary concern above all else in those final months of his student life at Oxford. It does not appear that he came to his decision easily, or quickly. The alternatives must have clamoured powerfully for attention in his mind. To resist Laud, meant expulsion from the University. It would then put him in peril for his life, bearing in mind the roving forays made by the authorities on behalf of the Star Chamber. And even if he escaped, his life would be ruined, he would never be appointed to a parish as minister. And he would lose the endowment from his rich uncle back in Wales. That uncle was a Royalist, and if he were to hear that his nephew had been disgraced by expulsion from Oxford, he would stop the flow of finance. And Owen's position as heir apparent to the Uncle's estates would of course, be jeopardised automatically.

Disgrace! Ignominy! Persecution! Penury!

Can we picture the young Owen, weighing up all these things, fearful of offending God, and yet perhaps, for a while, at least, trembling also at the alternative? Can we picture him, clad in academic garb, wandering in pensive gloom along Oxford's ancient streets, and finally, to stop in awe at that hallowed place just north of the Church of Saint Mary Magdalen, on the west side of Balliol College? And at that hallowed spot where, eighty years previously, Cranmer, and Latimer, and Ridley, had burned to death for their faith in Christ, could he have imagined Cranmer, proffering his guilty hand to the flames to be burned first? Perhaps too, he might have imagined the voice of old Latimer, crying out, as the lighted faggot was placed at his feet, "Be of good comfort: Master Ridley, play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as, I trust, shall never be put out."

²¹ Neal Op. cit. Vol. II Chapt. 5 for an account of Laud's persecution of the Calvinists. What happened to Prynne was typical nation-wide, with the result that Puritans began to leave the country for Holland and North America in droves, yet even this last resort came immediately under legal proscription. As Neal says,, "neither fidelity nor humanity had merit with this prelate". What Prynne's fine of £5000 is worth in today's money I hesitate to guess...inflation has compounded at about 100 times only from the 1890's to the present!

“Master Ridley, play the man...” In Owen’s day the candle those martyrs had lit was flickering, faltering, ready to be snuffed finally.

Owen “played the man”. “They, (believers)”, he was to write in subsequent years, “they will receive nothing, practise nothing, own nothing in His worship, but what is of His appointment. They know that from the foundation of the world He never did allow, or ever will, that in any thing the will of the creatures should be the measure of His honour, or the principle of His worship, either as to matter or manner....”²²

Thus then, in the year 1637, we find him turning his face from Oxford, his mind made up, willing to esteem “the reproach of Christ greater riches than all the treasures of Egypt” (Heb. 11 : 26). He could not have known then, as he left those cloistered precincts how the mysterious Providences of God were to bring him back to those ‘stately portals’ of the University city in but ten years, and with the highest honours. All that he knew now, was, that whatever torments of doubt and despondency raged within his soul, *he must obey God above all else*, come hell or high water.

Three hundred and fifty nine years later, the candle still burns in England. Flickering, maybe, sputtering, maybe, but in God’s Name it burns yet....in God’s Name may it burn on..... In those Puritan days, God raised up John Owen, a man for his time, who, seeing the theological roots of the danger that threatened God’s people in England, had the perception, the mental powers, and spiritual discernment, to rise up and meet that danger, head on, full tilt. Others rallied to the cause with him, his and their written works forming a huge bulwark of truth that has stretched over four centuries a defence of the Reformed Faith. There are academics today who would insist that it was not Arminianism that threatened the Reformed Churches in those days. They aver that it was but Ritualism, and not even Romanist ritualism at that, better to be called “Laudianism”, than Arminianism. But such theses misunderstand the whole Jesuitic origins and connections between Rome and Arminianism.²³ Owen had no doubt. His harrowing first hand experience at Oxford brought him into direct contact with the very engine that drove Laud, and drove Popery, nothing other than Arminianism, the system that insists man’s salvation is in man’s own hands, and not God’s. Owen was to make these issues his very first polemic priority, a priority which he was to return to again and again²⁴ in the years

²²Owen: Works Vol. 2 . “On Communion with God” p150.

²³ Tyacke Op cit. forward pp. XI ff. puts the correct perspective.. “Arminianism” was “the theological dimension” he points out. Significantly on that same page Tyacke draws attention to how, in 1622 the arch-Arminian Grotius had presented Laud with a copy of his *Disquisitio* on Pelagianism, in which he explicitly criticises “St. Augustine, and his Calvinist expositors on the subject of Predestination”.

²⁴ He returned to the topic for instance, in his later treatise “Death of Death” (1648), and in “Of the Death of Christ” (1650), and in the 678 page mega-treatise “The Doctrine of the Saint’s Perseverance Explained and Confirmed” (1654). But in many other parts of his works he takes up the cudgels against Arminianism, which he was wont to equate with “poison”.

to come..... in God's providence for His church, Owen was to become a *bulwark* against Arminianism. Such a bulwark, indeed, that it has taken three hundred more years for Arminianism, with its theologically compromising half-sister, Amyraldianism, to wheedle their ways around it, thereby softening up the Protestant masses for the next, planned, Romanist *putsch*.

To be continued,(DV) in Issue No. 17.....

Hence hath been the rise of all our miseries, of all our dissensions, whilst factious men laboured day and night to commend themselves to them who sat aloft in the temple of God, by introducing new popish-Arminian errors, whose patronage they had wickedly undertaken. Who would have thought that our church would ever have given entertainment to these Belgic semi-Pelagians, who have cast dirt upon the faces and raked up the ashes of all those great pious souls whom God magnified, in using as his instruments to reform His church; to the least of which the whole troop of Arminians shall never make themselves equal, though they swell till they break? What benefit did ever come to this church by attempting to prove that the chief part in the several degrees of our salvation is to be ascribed unto ourselves, rather than God? - which is the head and sum of all the controversies between them and us. And must not the introducing and fomenting of a doctrine so opposite to that truth our church hath quietly enjoyed ever since the first Reformation necessarily bring along with it schisms and dissensions, so long as any remain who love the truth, or esteem the Gospel above preferment? Neither let any deceive your wisdoms, by affirming that they are differences of an inferior nature that are at this day agitated between the Arminians and the orthodox divines of the Reformed church..... Consider seriously their denying of that fundamental article of *original sin*. Is this but a small escape in theology? - why, what need of the gospel, what need of Christ himself, if our nature be not guilty, depraved, corrupted? Neither are many of the rest of less importance. Surely these are not things (which) as Augustine speaks, - "about which we may differ without loss of peace or charity". One church cannot wrap in her bosom Augustine and Pelagius, Calvin and Arminius.

John Owen: Epistle Dedicatory to : "A Display of Arminianism".

1642