

LIVING IN ITS SHADOW: WORCESTER CATHEDRAL AND ELLEN WOOD'S *THE CHANNINGS*

Candice Pearson

Abstract: This article explores the architecture and history of Worcester Cathedral and the novel it inspired, Ellen Wood's *The Channings* (1862). The cathedral's primary function and its sphere of influence altered dramatically over the centuries and in *The Channings* we see how economically and culturally dependent upon the cathedral are its nearby inhabitants; we also see how they often overlook the cathedral's spiritual purpose. While the cathedral and its congregation evidently stimulated Wood to write the novel; the novel in return conclusively affects the reader's perception of the cathedral.

'O that these walls could speak' entreated Henry Lord Bishop of Worcester in his sermon preached at the opening of his newly refurbished cathedral in 1874.¹ Through fiction, in her 1862 novel *The Channings*, Ellen Wood answered this very plea.² *The Channings'* cathedral is called Hestonleigh, but it is easily identifiable as Worcester Cathedral which was situated just metres away from Wood's childhood home and would have dominated the view from her home's windows. As her son wrote: 'Doubtless before she could even speak, her large wondering eyes would trace with earnest gravity the solemn Cathedral outlines.'³ In *The Channings* Wood explores the cathedral congregation's thoughts, as well as their daily customs and interactions, and we see how dependent the characters of Hestonleigh are upon the cathedral which dominates their lives physically, economically, culturally, and spiritually. In this essay I will examine the impact of the cathedral on the fictional lives of the inhabitants of a cathedral town, while also examining the real life building that inspired *The Channings*. For the purposes of this essay I will concentrate on the aspects of the cathedral that feature most prominently in *The Channings*, particularly the cloisters.

The Channings is a simple study of a Christian determination, focusing on a middle-class family (the Channings) and their neighbours, whose lives revolve around the cathedral and its school. While many of Wood's other novels feature episodes of serious depravity, the crime at the centre of *The Channings* is a petty theft and the melodrama comes in the form of a prank ghost in the cloisters. Despite its comparatively pedestrian plot, *The Channings* still sold 140,000 copies by 1895.⁴ Founded in 680, Worcester Cathedral has an incredibly rich architectural history, having been developed in four major phases over four centuries. After its foundation, the Cathedral underwent its first architectural transformation in 983 when it was rebuilt with an additional monastery by Saint Oswald, whose remains are still in the cathedral. Miracles were said to happen at the site of Oswald's death and Bede recounted one incident which particularly chimes with *The Channings*. Bede wrote of a paralysed girl who made a pilgrimage to Oswald's place of death, returning home able to walk.⁵ We see a similar miracle occur in *The Channings*,

¹ Henry Lord Bishop of Worcester, 'A Sermon Preached at the Opening of Worcester Cathedral' (Cambridge University Press, 1874). 5

² Henry Lord Bishop of Worcester. 3

³ Charles William Wood, *Memorials of Mrs Henry Wood* (London: Bentley, 1894). 4

⁴ Henry Wood, *East Lynne*, Broadview Literary Texts (Peterborough, Ont. ; Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2000). 13

⁵ Bede and others, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (London: Penguin, 1990). 158-159

when the disabled Mr Channing is cured by a visit to the Continental springs and he says with certainty: 'God has cured me.'⁶

Returning to the cathedral, it was Saint Wulstan in 1084 who rebuilt the cathedral as we would recognise it today. In Anglo-Saxon times Worcester was one of the country's most important monastic cathedrals, which continued through into later Middle Ages when its Benedictine monks were at the forefront of academia. The walls of the cathedral were a constant presence and an everyday reminder to the monks (and to the moral thrust of Wood's novel) of God's purpose for life, encapsulated in the motto of the Benedictine monks '*Laborare est orare*'; 'to work is to pray'. This aphorism is embodied in *The Channings* by the Channing family who, after a change in circumstance, see work as not only necessary but as a divine duty. Both the cathedral and the novel are structures within which the virtue of a God fearing life can be promulgated and demonstrated and the stone walls of the cathedral provide a physical and moral framework for real people and the novel's characters. '*Laborare est orare*' is also the title of a painting by John Rogers Herbert, which was first exhibited in the same year *The Channings* was published.⁷ The painting is of a warm harvest landscape. The artist painted himself in the extreme foreground of the painting; interesting because Wood is a similarly dominant presence in her novels. The back of the painting carried an inscription of 'The Parable of the Sower' from Luke.⁸ In this parable, the seeds that fall on fertile soil flourish, while the seeds that land among the thorns or on stony ground fail. This reminds us of the (flourishing) Channing and the (failing) Yorke children from Wood's novel. In their calm, disciplined, honest and devout household the Channing children thrive; while in their chaotic, lazy, fiery and faithless household the Yorke children fail.

The novel throws the Channing and the Yorke families together via their connection at the King's Cathedral School; a real school that was founded after Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries and, under the Cathedral Statutes of 1542, created the King's Schools to replace the former almonry (monastic charity) schools. This royal charter was detailed in the novel by Wood, who knew the King's School Worcester and its traditions well as her brothers had been scholars there. Her son described how she would watch 'the College boys tearing through the gateway of Edgar Tower'⁹, would listen to their footsteps clattering through the cloisters as they rushed to and from school; and thus even in infancy she began to study unconsciously the character of that complex creature, the schoolboy.¹⁰ Edgar Tower is all that now remains of Worcester's Norman castle. It is now known as Edgar Tower as it once displayed a statue of Edgar, who was crowned King by Oswald in 978.¹¹ In *The Channings*, Edgar Tower's gatekeeper, Old Jenkins (or Jack Ketch¹² as he is known to the boys), is central to the plot as an unsympathetic caricature who would ideally keep the boys locked out, reminding us of the Tower's original purpose as part of the city fortress.¹³

One purpose of the King's Schools was to educate the poor but intelligent local boys who would not otherwise be able to afford the tuition needed to gain a place at Oxford University. The competition to win the school scholarship to Oxford is detailed throughout the

⁶ Mrs Henry Wood, *The Channings* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1895). 397

⁷ John Rogers Herbert, *Laborare Est Orare*, 1862, T01455, Tate <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/herbert-laborare-est-orare-t01455>>.

⁸ *The Bible Authorized King James Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Luke 8. 5-7

⁹ Edgar Tower was known as St Mary's Gate

¹⁰ Charles William Wood. 4

¹¹ OVS and Archive <http://www.ksw.org.uk/old-vigornians/history-of-the-school/edgar-tower> (22/02/14)

¹² Jack Ketch was an infamous executioner employed by Charles II.

¹³ Ute Engel, *Worcester Cathedral: An Architectural History* (Chichester, England: Phillimore, 2007). 29

novel, showing how dependent each boy's fate is upon the cathedral. Without the scholarship, Tom Channing and his rival Gerald Yorke would not be able to go to university for 'want of funds at home'.¹⁴ It is not just the school boys who are economically dependent upon the cathedral. Many of the novel's characters rely on the church for their income, including Arthur Channing who is employed as the Cathedral organist even when the town turns against him as a suspected thief. Arthur inwardly struggles with the false accusations, but when he plays the organ he is feels connected to God: 'the boy's whole heart went up with the words [of the psalm]'.¹⁵ Henry Lord Bishop's sermon echoed this sentiment, showing it as a universal theme: 'How many broken hearts have been bound up here by the ministrations of heavenly grace, when earthly powers have failed them!.. How many grudges against our neighbour given up!'¹⁶ Later, when Arthur is exonerated, his faith is notably reflected in an anthem he plays: 'The Lord deliverith the souls of his servants: and all they that put their trust in him shall not be destitute.' This sentiment 'told upon Arthur's heart, sending it up in thank fullness to the Giver of all good'.¹⁷ The cathedral architecture contributes to this sense of a connection with the heavens as when you look skywards the cathedral seems to rise from nowhere and soar into the clouds.

In the novel, the boys use the cathedral building as a playground, for example we see a boy 'trying to accomplish the difficult feat of standing on his head on the open mullioned window-frame, thereby running the danger of coming to grief amongst the gravestones and grass of the College burial-yard'.¹⁸ Though Henry Lord Bishop said: 'What an inestimable advantage it is to our people, that we have such buildings, set apart for such purposes... How elevating should be our use of such buildings! How suggestive they are of holy things!'¹⁹, it is mainly the Channing family who reminds us the cathedral is a spiritual place.²⁰ God's influence on the building is a notion that Henry Lord Bishop felt was shared by all who contributed to its fabric: 'Holy men of old delighted to plan the fashion of the building and to execute the work with the most perfect skill that could be put in use, with self-denying absolute devotion of all the means that they could furnish, and with a single eye to the glory of the Great Being in whose service they felt it the greatest privilege to minister [...] No outlay of treasures was deemed too great; no devotion of time and thought and labour too engrossing, if only they could make the house of God worthy of the honour of His acceptance of it, and worthy as a monument of the piety of those who built it.'²¹

Henry Lord Bishop rhetorically asked: 'Who can regard without reverence the place, where the honour of our heavenly Father has long dwelt?', though Wood details the exploits of the pupils who show the cathedral little respect.²² The cloisters in particular are described as 'that famous playground of the college school' and the boys fiercely defend it as their play space 'since the school was founded'.²³ A cloister is an enclosed court that is attached to a monastic church and consists of a roofed ambulatory, often south of the nave and west of the transept. It surrounds open garden-like space, which is known as a garth, a 'lovely name brought by the

¹⁴ Mrs Henry Wood. 51

¹⁵ Mrs Henry Wood. 73

¹⁶ Henry Lord Bishop of Worcester. 6-7

¹⁷ Mrs Henry Wood. 444

¹⁸ Mrs Henry Wood. 208

¹⁹ Henry Lord Bishop of Worcester. 7

²⁰ For example, when being bullied by an older boy, the youngest Channing, Charley, says: 'I am in God's presence [...] and I will not tell a lie' Mrs Henry Wood. 10

²¹ Henry Lord Bishop of Worcester. 9

²² Henry Lord Bishop of Worcester. 6

²³ Mrs Henry Wood. 46 + 107

Vikings to England and in English monasteries never displaced by the Norman-French garden'.²⁴ The cloister served as a way of communication between different buildings (for example the chapter house and refectory) and was often equipped with small study areas, seats, and a washing area, allowing the monks ablutions before entering the refectory.²⁵ The location meant the north walkway received enough light to make it a suitable place for the monks to use for reading and writing. Michael Craze said: 'Although the Cloisters at Worcester cover only a third of an acre and an athletic novice or monk would have had to run fourteen laps to the mile, yet their history stretches a thousand years back to King Edgar.'²⁶

The boys however regularly fight in the cloisters, the sound of which Wood describes as 'according as little with their sacred character, as with the fair beauty of a summer's afternoon'.²⁷ This shows how traditions are taken forward, including the generational riot of choristers, within the unchanging solid stone frame of the cathedral. Wood uses an 'arena' metaphor to describe the usage of the cloisters and the Dean says: 'If the cloisters are to be turned into a bear-garden, I shall certainly order them to be closed to the boys'.²⁸ The college boys were not the first to misuse the cloisters however. During the Civil War, Parliamentary Dragoons housed troops and their horses in the cloisters.²⁹ In his 1723 *Survey of Worcestershire*³⁰, Habington said the Battle of Worcester left the cloisters strewn with corpses. The Civil War saw the destruction of the medieval windows (seven in each walk), which were initially reconstructed without glass in 1762-9 and the glass was not replaced until 1866.³¹ In his 1781 diaries of his travels around England, John Byng said the cloisters 'look better than at most places. There is a total want of stain'd glass, so necessary for church grandeur to cast a dim religious light'.³² Perhaps the lack of glass (and therefore perhaps assumed lack of splendour) contributes to the boys' misuse of the cloisters.

Wood found the cloisters particularly inspiring: 'the quiet cloisters she crowded with dream people, and at night she watched the outlines of the cathedral steeped in the moonlight, she would fancy the dark and solemn aisles peopled with all the ghosts of those who reposed there and belonged to the historic past'.³³ As a girl, Wood would walk through the cloisters and marvel at the contrast of the 'solitary cloisters' compared to 'when the College boys, released from school, would invade the sacred precincts and make them echo with their noise'.³⁴ This is noted in *The Channings*, when Wood says the cloisters are like 'a large lake on the approach of a sudden storm [...] its unnatural stillness, death-like and ominous; its undercurrent of anger not yet apparent on the surface; and then the breaking forth of fury when the storm has come'.³⁵ Charley Channing meets the worst fate in the cloisters when the boys plan to trap him with a 'ghost' they have created. When trapped, Charley imagines the 'monks of bygone ages' and he

²⁴ Michael Craze, *Lectures on Worcester Cathedral* (Worcester: B.J. Lander & Sons, 1986). 37

²⁵ James Stevens Curl and John J Sambrook, *A Dictionary of Architecture* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²⁶ Michael Craze. 37

²⁷ Mrs Henry Wood. 206

²⁸ Mrs Henry Wood. 210 + 215

²⁹ Ute Engel, *Worcester Cathedral: An Architectural History* (Chichester, England: Phillimore, 2007).

http://worcestercathedral.co.uk/index.php?pr=The_Civil_War

³⁰ Thomas Habington, *A Survey of Worcestershire*, ed. by John Amphlett (Oxford: James Parker and Co., 1896).

³¹ Engel. 31

³² John Byng, *The Torrington Diaries, Containing the Tours Through England and Wales ... between the Years 1781 and 1794*, ed. by C. Bruyn Andrews (London, 1934), I. p45: 2.7.1781

³³ Charles William Wood. 5

³⁴ Charles William Wood. 6

³⁵ Mrs Henry Wood. 155

pictures the monks emerging at midnight to celebrate the Office of Vigils.³⁶ This is one of Wood's personal reveries from when she illicitly visited a monastery and at 'the witching hour' imagined 'the ghosts of all the dead-and-gone monks'.³⁷ When Charley is in the cloisters there is little light as the cloisters are surrounded by the taller cathedral buildings: 'the dim cloisters were before him; he was standing at the corner formed by east and south quadrangles, and the pale burial ground in their midst, with its damp grass and its gravestones, looked cold and lonely in the moonlight'.³⁸

The cloister survives today in its medieval format: a single-storey on the south side of the cathedral, in the angle between the nave and the south-west transept. Parts of the east and west walks of the cloister remain from Norman times, and there was a Late Gothic renovation of the cloister at the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries. The east cloister walk is longer than the others (the south walk makes a five degree deviation towards the south-east from the straight). The asymmetrical layout of the cloisters might suggest that an earlier building had existed in that position, perhaps the first Anglo-Saxon cathedral St Peter's, built by Bishop Oswald.³⁹ Each cloister has nine bays and transverse arches, which are decorated with tracery, though they differ slightly suggesting at the order in which they were built (Craze suggested west, east, south, north⁴⁰). The vaulting used is 'lierne'⁴¹; the Middle English word derived from the French for 'clematis'. This vaulting uses tertiary ribs to connect ribs from the vaulting shafts and the ridge ribs that ran through the bosses. In Worcester Cathedral, the bosses are made from a light coloured limestone, rather than the soft red sandstone of the vaults which highlights the bosses and draws the attention to the octagonal tracery. Many of the bosses are decorated with leaves, echoing the garth foliage.

When Charley does not return home on the 'cloister' evening, we see the cathedral and surrounding buildings take on a different personality: 'cold, shadowy it all lay'.⁴² By day, the cathedral looks warm with the 'red stone' used in local building.⁴³ Most of Worcester Cathedral is built of sandstone, though there is some light grey limestone and, in the east arm, some Purbeck marble. The sandstone was quarried from upriver local sources, namely Holt, Ombersley and Hardley, and was mostly dark red (though some graduated to a yellow shade) and makes the cathedral seem very warm by day. As Wood's contemporary John Ruskin said: 'the best tints are always those of natural stones'.⁴⁴ The sandstone used was also transported by river, though from Highley, near Bridgnorth, and the limestone from the Cotswold Hills.⁴⁵ The lesser used limestone was significantly more expensive as it was not connected by the River Severn network. Tufa, a very porous and lightweight rock, was also used internally for the vaults in the cathedral, and this was taken from a nearby quarry on the banks of the River Teme.⁴⁶ Echoing the thoughts of Ruskin, Henry Lord Bishop described the cathedral as: 'a monument in the fabric, not only of the piety of our fathers, who sought to honour the Lord with their substance and to provide an

³⁶ Julie Kerr, *Life in the Medieval Cloister* (London ; New York: Continuum, 2009). 56

³⁷ Charles William Wood. 33

³⁸ Mrs Henry Wood. 290

³⁹ Engel. 30

⁴⁰ Michael Craze. 42

⁴¹ 'Ribbed vault with some ribs not running from one of the main springing-points, but from rib to rib, usually joined to them at bosses.' Curl and Sambrook.

⁴² Mrs Henry Wood. 301

⁴³ Mrs Henry Wood. 6 + 111

⁴⁴ John Ruskin and J. G Links, *The Stones of Venice* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2003). 103

⁴⁵ Engel. 27

⁴⁶ Engel. 27

habitation for the dwelling of His honour, but of architectural skill and ingenuity also, bearing witness, by its beauty of structure and proportions, to the accomplished taste and talent of the architect who planned it.⁴⁷

The Channings opens with the sound of the ‘sweet bells’ from the cathedral, reminding the readers that the cathedral would aurally, as well as architecturally, dominate the town.⁴⁸ Wood’s first ‘remembered sounds were the sweet College bells ringing for service’.⁴⁹ The chiming cathedral clock tower also keeps time for the townspeople; a functional reality of the period but also a motif used by Wood to indicate plot developments. The first time we count the ‘chimed quarters of the cathedral’ is the day money is stolen from Mr Galloway’s office. The first bell notes that the usually dependable employee Jenkins is absent; the next bell signifies Galloway’s exit (when the money is stolen);⁵⁰ the next announces the arrival of the postman with evidence ‘confirming’ Arthur Channing’s guilt; and the next bell draws our attention to Galloway’s other employee, Roland (the real thief).⁵¹ The bell tower that Wood would have known is the Gothic crossing tower that was completed in 1374. Prior to that, there was a free standing octagonal bell tower which equalled the height of the cathedral.⁵² These freestanding towers were reasonably common in the middle ages, though there is no corroborated date on when the belfry was constructed (Green dates it to either the reign of King John Lackland or his son Henry III).⁵³ The belfry was devastated during the Civil War and it is thought that lead from the roof was melted down for ammunition.⁵⁴ The aforementioned organ was also deliberately destroyed by the Earl of Essex’s men when they took Worcester in 1642.⁵⁵

When she moved away from Worcester, Wood longed for the town and her ‘beloved Cathedral, with all its ties, social, ecclesiastical, and religious; the associations, romantic and real, within its precincts’.⁵⁶ *The Channings* shows the reader how influential architecture is to our everyday lives and even in this brief history of the cathedral we see how the role of a building can change dramatically over the years, even if its foundations (literal and cultural) appear to have altered little. The cathedral architecture has a function which is to praise God, and to provide a framework within which the Christian life can be lived and its value promoted. *The Channings* likewise provides a framework within which Christian lives are lived and the value of such lives are promoted. The form of the cathedral defines the lives of those that live within its precincts. Wood’s own life was obviously hugely affected by the considerable presence of the cathedral and that she wrote a novel centred around the cathedral precincts with its congregation as the characters shows how pervasive she felt the cathedral’s influence to be. Wood obviously felt the Cathedral was like a book; its very fabric recanting a narrative that stretches back a millennium. Since its publication, her book has shaped our appreciation of the Cathedral building as after reading *The Channings* it impossible to walk through the cathedral and its precincts without picturing Wood’s characters going about their daily lives; an impressive feat given the cathedral’s own narrative which includes some of the country’s most revered saints, not to mention royalty.

⁴⁷ Henry Lord Bishop of Worcester. 4

⁴⁸ Mrs Henry Wood. 1

⁴⁹ Charles William Wood. 6

⁵⁰ Mrs Henry Wood. 89 + 94

⁵¹ Mrs Henry Wood. 149 + 355

⁵² Engel.

⁵³ Valentine Green, *A Survey of the City of Worcester* (Worcester, 1764). 43

⁵⁴ Engel. 18

⁵⁵ Valentine Green, *The History and Antiquities of the City and Suburbs of Worcester* (London, 1796). Vol. 1, p105

⁵⁶ Charles William Wood. 18

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