

– part of a continuity in our national history. Suez and Iraq may be inconvenient glitches.

But it is his final chapter which challenges orthodox Remain and Leave interpretations of our history. In “The United Kingdom and Continental Union” Simms dismisses the EU as a doomed institution and in its place should be established a genuine United States of Europe, a federal system built on the British model of liberal, parliamentary governance.

Here the author indulges in what your reviewer thinks is a flight of fancy. This United States of Europe would have a single army, presumably modelled on the British Army, and a single language of governance, naturally English. One suspects that the French, just to pick one nation at random, might have robust views about this.

Britain’s Europe is a stimulating read, combining history with being a polemic. Perhaps politicians may now turn to it for solace or stimulation. 🇬🇧

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In just under 200 ‘incisive, elegantly written pages’, Andrew Chandler’s biography of George Bell recounts the remarkable life of a man of high ideals, writes Lord Lexden



George Bell, Bishop of Chichester
By Andrew Chandler
Wm. B. Eerdmans
Publishing Co.

Until a few months ago the formidable reputation of George Bell (1883-1958), Bishop of Chichester for nearly thirty years and runner-up for the Archbishopric of Canterbury in 1944, seemed totally secure. Within the Church of England he had long been revered as one of its greatest bishops, learned, devout and inspiring. More widely he was famous for his courageous stands in international

affairs. Before 1939 no one did more to sustain and defend German Christian leaders and Jews of all kinds in the face of Nazi persecution.

During the Second World War he led the protests against the bombing of entire German cities which killed so many blameless civilians. This brought him much criticism to which Churchill contributed richly, but no one questioned his deep Christian integrity. “The Church”, he said in 1943, “has still a special duty to be a watchman for humanity, and to plead the cause of the suffering, whether Jew or Gentile”.

On 22 October last year everything changed. The Church of England’s media centre issued a statement announcing that, under an out of court settlement in a civil case, compensation (later revealed to be £15,000) had been paid to an unnamed individual, subsequently given the pseudonym “Carol”, who had claimed to have suffered sexual abuse at Bishop Bell’s hands in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The current Bishop of Chichester, Martin Warner, said “we face with shame a story of abuse of a child”. Yet neither he, nor anyone else among the Church authorities, has divulged any information about the nature of the alleged uncorroborated abuse, where exactly it is supposed to have taken place, the manner in which investigations were conducted or the expertise possessed by the anonymous individuals who examined the undisclosed evidence and apparently found it convincing.

George Bell was condemned in secret by processes whose character is totally unknown. Today’s Church leaders have denied natural justice to one of the most eminent of their predecessors.

They themselves were subsequently made subject to the rigorous independent scrutiny which they failed to apply in Bishop Bell’s case. A detailed review of the Church’s conduct was carried out by a group of lawyers (two of them QCs), academics, members of both Houses and

open-minded senior Church figures, chaired by Frank Field. The group, of which I am a member, published its conclusions on March 20.

Our report [<http://www.georgebellgroup.org>] exposes the astonishing inadequacy of the procedures through which the Church authorities reached their verdict. In a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury accompanying the report, we stressed that “the processes and the evidence which have produced such a public denigration of Bishop Bell should now be the subject of a thorough investigation”.

“ Bell became ‘one of the very few Church leaders of the twentieth century to achieve a genuine significance in international history’ ”

On June 28, just two days before a debate on historical child sex abuse in the Lords which I introduced, the Church announced an independent review of the Bishop Bell case. It seems clear that the review will be extremely limited in scope. Speaking in my debate, the Bishop of Chelmsford said “it is a review of the process, which will enable us to learn lessons for future cases”. No indication has been given that the substantial evidence assembled by the Bell group will be taken into account. A review that does not examine whether a miscarriage of justice has taken place will not be a proper review at all.

Unsurprisingly, the Church authorities have never felt any need to consult today’s leading authority on Bell’s life and times. Over the last twenty years Dr Andrew Chandler, a well-known Church historian, has published a number of studies on aspects of Bell’s career, for which he drew on Bell’s voluminous papers and diaries in the Lambeth Palace archives. He has now produced a most timely new biography. ➤



Bishop Bell, left was "one of the very few Church leaders of the twentieth century to achieve a genuine significance in international history"

Chandler was putting the finishing touches to this outstanding biography – the first for nearly fifty years – when the Church issued its shattering statement last October. Nothing in the abundant records that he had consulted prepared him for the shock. He writes in a postlude to his book: "For Bell the piety of a bishop was not simply a state of mind. It was a craft and a discipline, and one that he exercised with a rigour that was, even in his own day, conspicuous."

Bell's daily life was an open book. A world famous figure, he travelled a great deal in a glare of publicity to advance major Christian causes. At home in Chichester,

Bell "worked alone in his study, but the door was always open so that his secretary could be in earshot". His chaplain during some of the years of alleged abuse (whom the Church has not bothered to consult) is adamant that "no child or young teenager ever entered" the Palace at Chichester, apart from the large numbers who came together for an annual Christmas party given by Bell and his wife.

It is perhaps as well that Chandler did not know what was coming when he drafted his account of Bell's life. He was able to concentrate entirely on the task of explaining how Bell became "one of the very few Church leaders of the twentieth

century to achieve a genuine significance in international history". He was a lifelong ecumenist, striking up a close friendship with Cardinal Hinsley of Westminster (after a long conversation with him Bell wrote "I felt a richer man, richer spiritually as well as richer in wisdom.")

A founding father of the World Council of Churches, he was the clerical counterpart of those idealistic statesmen from 1918 onwards who believed in the need for institutions that would bind nations together in the cause of peace.

In this work the German problem was for him always the most acute. He sought ways of overcoming it in association with many peace-loving Germans including two of Hitler's leading Christian opponents, Martin Niemoller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The last thing that Bonhoeffer did before his execution in April 1945 was to send a message to Bell: "Tell him that for me this is the end, but also the beginning – with him I believe in the principle of our universal Christian brotherhood which rises above all national hatreds."

Chandler recounts the life of this remarkable man of high ideals in just under 200 incisive, elegantly written pages. He is careful not to exaggerate the extent of Bell's influence. The bishop delivered many well argued speeches in the House of Lords during the twenty years he was a proud member of it. Lord Woolton, the Tories' most successful Party Chairman, remarked that the House "held him in the greatest respect, in complete disagreement".

At the most famous trial in history, held in public and relived each year in Holy Week, Pontius Pilate declared, according to St Luke's Gospel, "I find no fault in this man".

Why should the reputation of one of Christ's greatest twentieth-century servants be destroyed without proper forensic scrutiny of the single, uncorroborated allegation laid against him? 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿

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