



ONE BRITISH ARCHIVE

One British Archive: Seeing the Rev. John Clifford Archives and the Gender of Passive Resistance

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Abstract

This article discusses the archives of Westbourne Park Baptist Church in London and its world-renowned pastor in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Dr. John Clifford. As leader of the National Passive Resistance League, the fiery Clifford came to be synonymous with the Nonconformist conscience at the height of its political influence in the early twentieth century. The article foregrounds the tension between what I call archival intimacy and archival precarity, while analyzing the power of seeing the diverse photographs in this collection as evidence of the gendered politics of passive resistance in the early twentieth century. Some—though not all—of the collection that I consulted at Westbourne Park Baptist Church in 2016 has now been transferred to the Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford.

I went to Westbourne Park Baptist Church in London to search for archival traces of the inner life of the National Passive Resistance League and its leader Rev. John Clifford (1836–1923), Edwardian Britain's fiery champion of the rights of conscience. His remarkable ascent from respectable poverty as a lacemaker in 1840s Nottinghamshire to the presidency of the World Baptist Alliance in 1905 was the stuff of legends in his own lifetime. An advanced Gladstonian liberal attuned to the claims of the dispossessed, Clifford was synonymous with the Nonconformist conscience at the height of its political influence at the turn of the twentieth century.

Few remember Clifford today. Even his imposing Victorian Gothic “chapel” has been pulled down ([Figure 1](#)). Its newest replacement, a multi-purpose church complex that includes affordable housing, had not yet been built in 2016 when I arranged to meet the openhearted, intellectually curious leader of Westbourne Park Baptist Church, Pastor Jeremy “Jem” Sewell. Jem directed me to a dingy annex building where he—and boxes of archives related to his illustrious predecessor—awaited me. Jem eventually entrusted me with a key to the building so I could come and go when I pleased as I got to know the collection. Archival intimacy like this between researcher and collection is often only possible when papers remain in the hands of individuals, families, or private organizations. No one is given their own key to the British Library.

Such collections have long been my scholarly stock in trade. A phone number and address in a directory once led me to the attic of Oxford House in Bethnal Green, where treasures stuffed into giant trash bags awaited me. I spent part of one summer sleeping with the



Figure 1. Engraving of Westbourne Park Baptist Chapel, ca. 1876. Source: *The Building News*, 24 August 1876, 183.

Hobhouse Papers in a retrofitted granary on the grounds of Hadspen House, the Hobhouse family's Somerset estate. A Google search got me Jem's email address and an appointment. His passion to welcome and empower the global immigrants living not far from the church prompted me to reflect upon how Clifford, an outspoken critic of the Boer War, once connected his London congregation to the ethical dilemmas of Britain's governing of its empire. Encountering archives in the very place where they were created—engaging with those people who remain bound to them through ties of blood or affinity—provokes and deepens that exigent colloquy between present and past that animates our own relationship to the archive.

The flip side of this kind of archival intimacy is archival precarity. When I began drafting this article, I had lost track of the collection. I suspected that it had left the custody of Westbourne Park Baptist Church as part of its literal rebuilding and reimagining for the twenty-first century. I eventually tracked down part of it to the Angus Library, devoted to Baptist history, at Regent's Park College, Oxford. Archives, like evangelical Christians, can once be lost and now be found (Luke 15:10). The very act of preserving records from the past, calling them "archives," and placing them in institutional settings designed to make them more widely available and keep them safe, also changes them. In this case, some parts of the Clifford Papers that I consulted at Westbourne Park Baptist Church do not appear to be in the Angus Library; the archival fragments of Clifford, the man, and his once famous church seem now to be separated.

Clifford was the architect of one of Edwardian Britain's fierce "conscience wars," the term that I use to describe affectively charged contests about conscience itself as an ethical and political category. I am writing a book about such struggles in *Four Nations Britain* and its empire, from the early nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Under banner of conscience, Clifford passively resisted paying education rates that supported state funding for sectarian religious education in denominational schools under Balfour's 1902 Education Act. Clifford's refusal to pay his education rate led to dozens of well-publicized arrests, magisterial hearings, the distraint of his household goods, fines, and imprisonment. From 1902 to 1905, magistrates issued 53,863 summonses to Clifford's army of followers in the National Passive

Resistance League—overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, men. Their civil disobedience helped to fuel the Liberal Party’s electoral triumph in 1906.¹

So far flung was Clifford’s fame that an admiring Indian barrister in South Africa sought him out. Would Clifford judge an essay contest on “The Ethics of Passive Resistance” sponsored by his weekly newspaper, *Indian Opinion*?² At the turn of the twentieth century, passive resistance thus bound together Clifford and Mohandas Gandhi, Britain and South Africa, the civil libertarian battles of English Nonconformists and South African Indians.

About Clifford’s private struggles and desires, these boxes yielded no clues and no secrets. They contained few letters and no trace of his engagement with Gandhi. Little remained on the inner workings of the National Passive Resistance League and Clifford’s lieutenants, who coordinated its highly choreographed nonviolent protests at public auctions of passive resisters’ distraised household goods. Archives often frustrate researchers who come—as I did to Clifford’s—expecting answers to their own questions.

One thing did stand out for me. The contents of the collection are visually arresting. Several boxes burst with photographs: studio portraits of Clifford; an 1896 photographic presentation gift album; and photographs taken by members of the National Passive Resistance League and published in its weekly newspaper, the *Crusader*. What cultural and political work, I wondered, did these three quite different kinds of photographic images perform? What could be learned by *just seeing* an archive, rather than trying to read between its written lines?

Studio portraits of a pensive Clifford abounded for use as frontispieces in his own books, for publicity materials, and for biographies written about him. Someone had packed these photographs into one or two boxes. This decision had the unintentional effect of amplifying their collective visual message in a way that finding these portraits scattered across all of the boxes probably would not. Taken together, they represented Clifford as an Old Testament prophet and latter-day Oliver Cromwell. In most portraits, Clifford rests his hand on his cheek (Figure 2). This visual gesture conveyed probity and deep thought. They say to the viewer, “trust me; I have Divine wisdom to share with you.” Such photographic portraits were standard fare for late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain’s celebrity Nonconformist preachers, from William Booth to R. J. Campbell.

In among the portraits, I discovered that Clifford’s far-flung army of ministerial acolytes, affectionately called “Clifford’s Boys,” had assembled a gift album for him in 1896. It is a beautiful physical object with its leather binding and neat clasp mechanism, the calligraphed and illustrated presentation letter (Figure 3), and its dozens of photographs. It contains page after page of signed photographs of each of “Clifford’s boys” attired in austere ministerial garb (Figures 4–5). These are images of respectable Christian manliness and Baptist homosociability. There is nothing the least bit boyish or playful or queer about its gallery of adult men. These photographs convey Nonconformity’s comfortable conformity to gendered norms of bourgeois masculinity.

The *Crusader* published dozens of grainy amateur photographs, under the rubric “Eye-gate of the Electorate.”³ The photograph “What the Education Act Has Done” powerfully conveys

¹ See J. E. B. Munson, “A Study of Nonconformity in Edwardian England as revealed by the Passive Resistance Movement” (DPhil, University of Oxford, 1973), 256. David Thompson has published extensively on Clifford. For a good summary of Clifford’s ministry and activism, see David Thompson, “John Clifford, (1836–1923): Liberal, Socialist, Free Churchman, Companion of Honour,” *Baptist Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (2023): 203–17.

² On Gandhi’s announcement of the terms of the initial prize essay contest, see “A Prize of Ten Guineas. For an Essay on ‘The Ethics of Passive Resistance,’” *Indian Opinion*, 30 October 1907, 506; for the winning essay, see “The Ethics of Passive Resistance,” *Indian Opinion*, 18 April 1908, 175–77. On Gandhi and Clifford, see Letter to H. S. L. Polak, 23 September 1909, 113, 115; Letter to H. S. L. Polak, 30 September 1909, 128; Letter to Aylmer Maude, 10 November 1909, 222, in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 98 vols (eBook; New Delhi, 1999), vol. 10. For Gandhi’s views of Clifford, see also M. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, ch. XIII “Satyagraha v Passive Resistance,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 29.

³ See *Crusader*, 15 February 1905, 437.

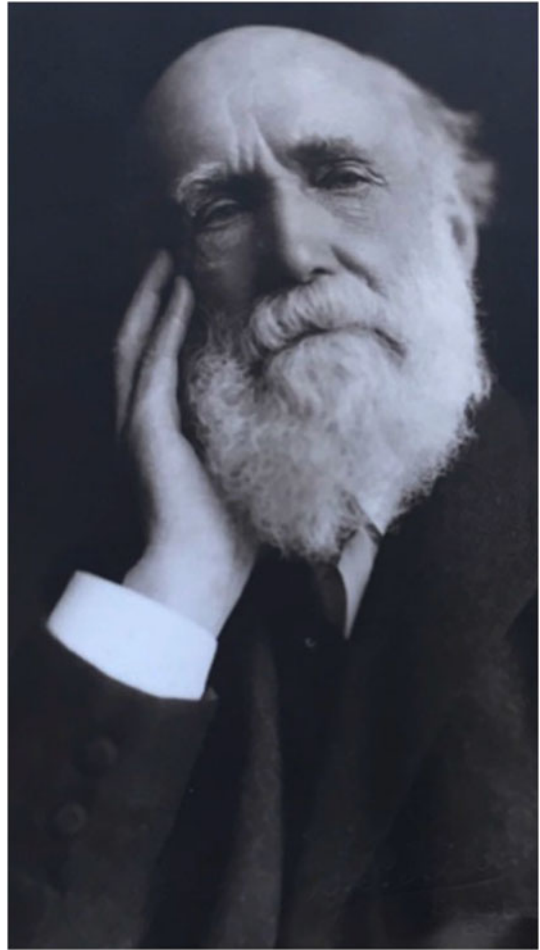


Figure 2. Undated portrait of Dr. Clifford, taken for use in a publication about him.

the state's decision to violate bourgeois domesticity itself by stripping Mr. and Mrs. Baker's parlor of its furnishings (Figure 6). "Dr. Page's Family—Separated by Prison Walls under the Education Act" highlighted the *central because absent* figure of the paterfamilias, Dr. Walter Page (Figure 7). The names of his wife, Florence, and their children Marjorie, Leonard, and Christine, are irrelevant to the ideological work of the photograph because their job is to stand in for Dr. Page's dispossessed manhood.⁴

Thinking with, and about, these and other photographs in the archive led me to the research question: could passive resistance be made manly? For Gandhi, the answer proved to be no. Even by the time that he wrote to Clifford, Gandhi had begun to disavow the term "passive resistance" in favor of *Satyagraha*, or Soul Force.⁵

Clifford and his followers, by contrast, remained fervently committed to passive resistance—in spite, and perhaps because, of its oxymoronic assemblage of masculine

⁴ On Dr. Page's arrest for the sake of conscience, see *London Daily News*, 22 June 1905, 7. I found the names of Page's family through the 1911 Census data via Ancestry.com.

⁵ See Keith Breckenridge, *Biometric State: Global Politics of Identification and Surveillance in South Africa, 1850 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2014), ch. 3; Radhika Mongia, "Gender and the Historiography of Gandhian Satyagraha in South Africa," *Gender and History* 18 (April 2006): 130–49. On Gandhi's intense identification with the British empire during his years in South Africa, see Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher-Bearer of Empire* (Stanford, 2016).

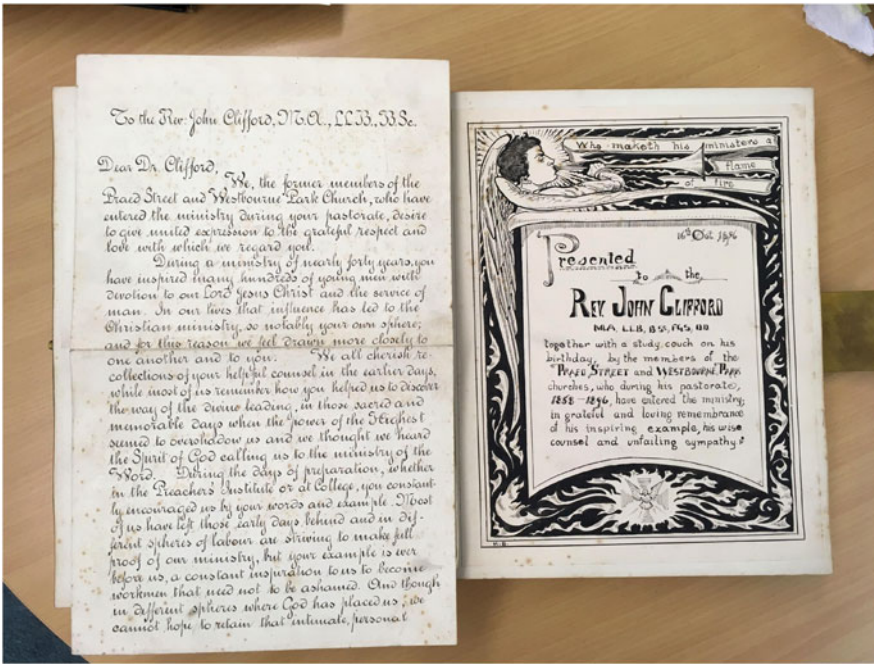
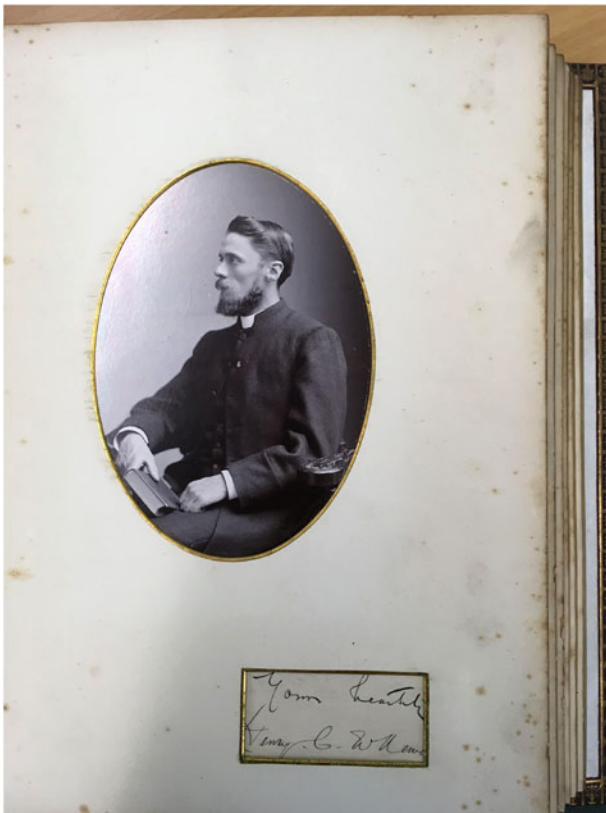
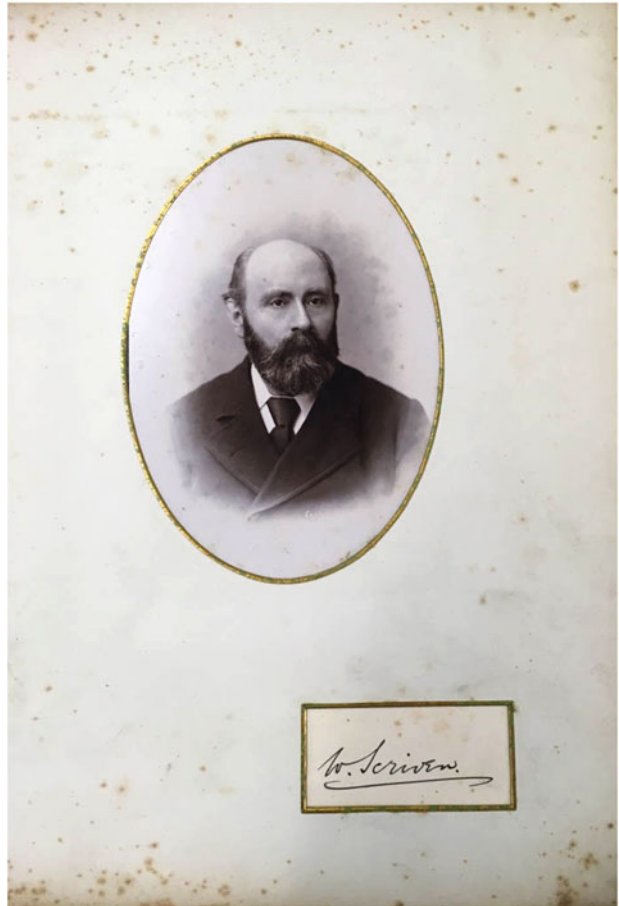


Figure 3. The presentation letter by “Clifford’s Boys” celebrating Dr. Clifford for inspiring them to enter into Christian ministry and draw “more closely to one another and to you.” Both figures found among the Clifford Papers at Westbourne Park Baptist Church.



Figures 4 and 5. “Clifford’s Boys,” 1896 Gift Album, Clifford Papers.



Figures 4 and 5. Continued

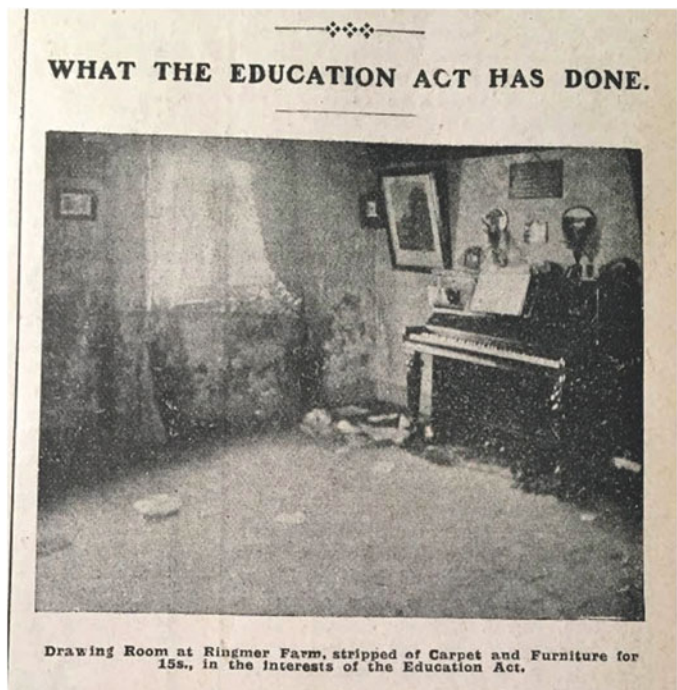


Figure 6. "What the Education Act Has Done," *Crusader*, 2 March 1905, 489.



Figure 7. “Dr. Page’s Family—Separated by Prison Walls Under the Education Act,” *Crusader*, 13 July 1905. Found among the Clifford Papers.

“resistance” with feminine “passivity.” Seeing the rich and varied images of the Clifford archive disclosed a compensatory visual rhetoric, one that emphasizes passive resisters’ investment in a hyper-masculine, bourgeois, liberal individualism threatened by a state intent on dispossessing them.

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