

CHURCH MUSIC SOCIETY

## Vocation and Endeavour



Sir Sydney Nicholson  
and the early years  
of the Royal School of Church Music

WATKINS SHAW



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## **DR WATKINS SHAW O.B.E. 1911-1996**

Successively Committee Member, (first) Honorary General Editor, and, from 1979 to 1987, Chairman of the Church Music Society, Dr Shaw made a contribution of inestimable benefit to the Society. His presence among us as a much-valued counsellor and Senior Vice-President is greatly missed.

The Society is particularly pleased to have the chance (during the year of the 50th anniversary of the death of Sir Sydney Nicholson, like Dr Shaw an erstwhile Chairman) to issue this paper in tribute as much to Dr Shaw as to the remarkable achievement of Sir Sydney himself.

## **CHURCH MUSIC SOCIETY**

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## **VOCATION AND ENDEAVOUR**

**Sydney Nicholson and the early years of the  
Royal School of Church Music  
(School of English Church Music)**

by  
**WATKINS SHAW**

## **PREFACE**

What follows began as a response to the wish of the present director of the Royal School of Church Music, Mr [Dr] Harry Bramma, to discover the influences and considerations which caused Sydney Nicholson to establish the School of English Church Music (as it was originally known). But when I came to handle the material it seemed to me that Nicholson's purposes could not be fully understood without some account of the actual working of what he created. This led, then, to an account of the early years of the School. But there was no obvious chronological or topical line of demarcation at which to bring that to an end earlier than the outbreak of war in 1939, and so sections III and IV were compiled.

Having got thus far, I was within not much more than seven years of his death, and saw that his work in those years was expressive of his personality and deserving of record. Yet this was an ending, not a new beginning, and it seemed perverse to expect whatever pen may eventually carry the tale through to the post-Nicholson years to start with a coda. I therefore carried on further to 1947 (sections V and VI). Thus, in hybrid fashion, what was begun simply as an enquiry into origins branched out into a sketch (not to be dignified with the term 'history') of what, neatly enough, is virtually the first 20 years of the School which Nicholson founded.

There is no intention here to portray his complete character and personality as required for a biography proper. Yet any account of what he planned and did for the School, and also his manner of doing it, inevitably draws near to biography and brings us clearly face to face with a large part of his personality that an imbalance would be left if we did not here refer, however summarily, to some other features. For example, he was a man of varied hobbies - carpentry, photography, printing,

sketching, water-colour painting. He was an early devotee of the motor car. He had a ready gift for light verse, and himself wrote the libretti for his musical-dramatic pieces, *The Children of the Chapel*, *The Boy Bishop*, *The Guggenheimer Emerald*, and *Passionate Peter*. (Another, *The Mermaid*, had 'book' by George A Birmingham.) Inactivity was something he could not abide. The extent and character of his influential work as musical editor for *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (the Second Supplement, 1916; *Hymns Ancient and Modern Revised* 1950) lie outside our present scope. As a minor composer, well skilled in the craft, he was gifted with a flow of attractive melody removed from the expected academic invention of the stock figure of a 'church composer'. The long-enduring and admiring devotion of his ex-choristers speaks of some personal charisma (as would now be said); and so also does a recent tribute from a former student of the College of St Nicolas: 'You always felt you could approach him about anything on your mind, and knew his help and affection would always be there'. And finally there is his modesty. He was not at all shy of proudly recounting what had been achieved by the SECM (for example, in his address at the 10th anniversary meeting, or writing in *St Nicolas* when the College closed in 1939), but he always speaks impersonally. Not once does he use the first person personal pronoun. It is invariably 'when we talked of the possibility....' or 'today it is an accomplished fact', and so on, though it was, after all, his achievement.

I myself saw Nicholson on but two occasions, and then only briefly, so my view of him is impersonal and disinterested. But I am grateful for conversations or correspondence with some who, in different respective capacities, remember him personally: Messrs H. V. Abbott and Edred Wright (former Westminster Abbey choristers and loyal supporters of the College of St Nicolas); Mr H. L. A. Green (Secretary of the SECM/RSCM 1928-64); Messrs Peter Craddy, Ronald Tickner, and Sir David Willcocks (former students of the College of St Nicolas). I am grateful also for the benefit of the loan of Mr Abbott's typescript reminiscences. The RSCM kindly gave me access to early records and extended hospitality to enable me to consult them.

As references are sometimes made to Nicholson's having been the uncle of Laurence Olivier, the great actor, and also to some relationship to Walter S. Vale, the well-known former organist to All Saints' Church, Margaret Street, London, I have added an outline family tree on p. 42 to satisfy curiosity about this.

On the title page I have referred to the Royal School of Church Music, which by royal command became the title of the School of

English Church Music in March 1945. But below, when writing about the years before that, it would have been an anachronism to speak otherwise than of the School of English Church Music.

I have written from a personal point of view. The opinions and judgments expressed are my responsibility, and are not necessarily those of the Royal School of Church Music or any of its officers.

W.S. June 1990.

## SOURCES

1. Sydney H. Nicholson, *Musings of a Musician* (typescript of an unpublished autobiography to 1939 in the keeping of the Royal School of Church Music, whose kind permission to quote extracts is gratefully acknowledged). All indented material in section I is from this source. Other references to it are in the simple form. '(p.128)'.
2. Minutes of the Provisional Council, and its successors, of the School of English Church Music. These are prefaced by details of the inaugural meeting in the Jerusalem Chamber of Westminster Abbey on 6 December 1927.
3. Annual Reports of the SECM/RSCM
4. The *Quarterly News Sheet*, April 1928 to October 1930. An SECM publication.
5. *English Church Music*, vols i-xvii (1931-47). A quarterly journal in succession to (4) above. Generally passim; certain specific references in the text take the form ECM followed by the year of volume and page number.
6. *St Nicolas*, July 1937 to November 1939. The journal of the College of St Nicolas, Chislehurst.
7. *The Musical Times*, vols lxix-lxxxviii (1928-47). Generally passim; certain specific references in the text take the form MT followed by the year of volume and page number.
8. Gerald H. Knight, *The First Forty Years*. A Royal School of Church Music Pamphlet, [1968].
9. H. V. Abbott, *The School of English Church Music*. Private unpublished typescript reminiscences.

# I

## S. H. NICHOLSON

### FAMILY BACKGROUND AND EARLY YEARS

Sydney Hugo Nicholson (1875-1947) was the youngest of the three children (all boys) born to an elderly father, then aged 67, his mother being some 30 years younger. The father, Sir Charles Nicholson, both knight and baronet, MD, Hon.LL.D Edin., Hon.DCL Oxon., Hon.LL.D Cantab: (1808-1904) was a man of many attributes and attainments. By profession a physician, he was also philanthropic and beneficially active in public affairs, scholarly, and interested in antiquities and the arts. Orphaned at an early age, he was brought up by a maternal uncle, William Ayscough, who, having made money by a shipping line and trade between Whitehaven and Australia, then settled in Australia and acquired further wealth as a landowner. Charles Nicholson, after qualifying in medicine at the University of Edinburgh, joined him in Australia and set up in practice there. Two years later, in 1836, Ayscough died, leaving most of his fortune to this nephew, who, while not abandoning medicine entirely, began to take an interest in politics. Eventually he served three times as Speaker of the Legislative Council of New South Wales, was knighted in 1852, and in 1859 became the first President of the Legislative Council of Queensland, when he also received his baronetcy. His important work towards the foundation of the University of Sydney, opened in 1852, represents his salient achievement, and he was apparently generous towards it. He was Chancellor of the University from 1854 to 1862.

Shortly after retiring from professional work, he settled in England in 1862, and then married. Australia, however, remained close to his heart, and his youngest son's first Christian name alludes to the capital of New South Wales. He was remembered there long afterwards, as that son was to discover on a visit (for the School of English Church Music) in 1934, when the University gave him the honorary degree of MA.

Not unexpectedly, in view of his father's age, Sydney as a child was not close to his father. But he left an attractive account of Sir Charles:

His main interest in life was undoubtedly scholarship. Though not much of a conversational linguist he could read most [sic] languages, including Hebrew; he had a real affection for the classics and a wonderful memory, so that even in old age he would quote complete Odes of Horace or portions of Virgil, as well as his favourite poets, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Dryden, Tennyson, and others: he was also a

keen student of Dante. His chief subject was Egyptology, and his one published volume, *Aegyptiaca*, deals with this, mainly in relation to his collection at Sydney University. He possessed a fine papyrus of the Book of the Dead and several beautiful illuminated manuscripts and early printed books ... He was also a student of church history and theology ... He had marked artistic perception, as shown by the beautiful things he collected, as for example his tapestry and illuminated manuscripts ... Besides all this he must have been an excellent man of business ... and [was] chairman from 1872 to 1902 of the London Board of the Liverpool and London and Globe Insurance Company, taking on this responsible office at a time of grave crisis for the Company and steering it through to wonderful success.

Lady Nicholson is reported to have had some skill in painting and sketching, and a deep interest in theology. At the family home the boys met interesting people like A. H. Sayce, orientalist and philologist; Max Müller, another philologist; T. H. Huxley; and Sophy Horsley, pianist and friend of Mendelssohn.

Against such a background, it is not surprising that each of Sir Charles's sons adopted a calling which touched both church and the arts. The eldest, the second baronet (Sir Charles A. Nicholson), became an architect who executed some important ecclesiastical commissions, at Portsmouth Cathedral among others; the second son, A. K. Nicholson, was an artist in stained glass, responsible among other things for the Elgar memorial window in Worcester Cathedral; while in the third, who became a church musician, public spirit and organising capacity also may have sprung from his ancestry. Additionally important was the benefit of security: Sydney never had to struggle in an educational or economic sense, and though he could in no way be described as a man of wealth, his financial independence was significant for the accomplishment of the work he eventually set himself to do.

As to music, however, he owed next to nothing to his family background. But he himself said that he could not remember a time when he 'did not love music more than anything in the world', and he first played the organ for a service in 1883 or 1884 at Totteridge Church, Herts., near his home. It was while at Rugby School that he came under a first-rate musician, Basil Johnson, who taught him the organ while despairing of his efforts. When the time came for him to leave school he declared his wish to become a musician, deeply to his father's disappointment. Sir Charles had occupied a certain position in public life, while 'music to him meant almost nothing beyond a polite accomplishment, and as a profession seemed quite futile'. However, to



test the matter the boy was sent to Sir Walter Parratt for interview, and he pronounced in favour, recommending, however, that before concentrating on music Sydney should take an arts degree at Oxford. 'This advice' (Nicholson afterwards wrote)

I have never for one moment regretted, for though it has meant that I have been handicapped through life as an executant, never attaining the first rank in this respect, the gain in other directions was enormous; had I concentrated at once on music I am sure that I should never have met with the success that has fallen to my lot.

At New College, Oxford, he read for the Honour School of English Language and Literature, taking a third class in 1897, and then settled down for three years to serious musical study at the Royal College of Music under Parratt for the organ and Stanford for composition. In 1902 he took the Oxford degree of B.Mus. Meanwhile, three important and formative experiences came his way.

It was as an undergraduate that he first came into touch with church music in a regular way, through the choirs of Christ Church Cathedral, New College, and Magdalen College, and he frequently attended the daily services at all three. He remembered the high standard of the Magdalen choir under J. Varley Roberts, while rating the choir of New College as 'excellent; perhaps less finished than Magdalen, but I think more natural and spontaneous' under James Taylor, and spoke of the splendid organ playing of Basil Harwood and the more interesting repertory at Christ Church.

Next, he was persuaded to help at a 'Ragged School' for boys held on Sunday afternoons 'in a somewhat dilapidated building in a pretty bad slum' in Oxford. He had little success with the usual kind of Sunday School lessons, and so had recourse to the establishment of a week-night singing class for these boys. This achieved a modest success:

... several of the boys managed to get into the choirs at the smaller Colleges and the parish churches, and when the time came to leave Oxford I was quite sorry to have to give up my class. It was a useful experience, and I advise any young man whose job it will be to manage boys to seek for a similar chance. No one can teach you how to handle boys in the lump; you have got to find out for yourself ...

Thus was revealed to him his innate capacity, almost genius, for working with, and directing, boys - and not just selected boys - which is at the heart of so much that he was able to achieve.

Thirdly, while still at the RCM, he became organist of Chipping Barnet Parish Church, not far from the family home. And during the same time he again had experience of voluntary work with unselected material at the Boys' Farm Home in East Barnet, where he paid a weekly visit. 'It was interesting', he wrote, 'to try to get some musical results out of these very rough lads, and I was not wholly unsuccessful'. A direct outcome of this was the compilation of his once well-known anthology, *British Songs for British Boys*.

His work as organist at Chipping Barnet, continuing after he left the RCM, marks the beginning of Nicholson's career as a church musician, which was to carry him to one of the peaks of the profession. He left there in 1903 for the Lower Chapel of Eton College, where his experiences in the conditions then prevailing were not happy. Then followed a year's further study at the Conservatory of Frankfurt-am-Main, and a term teaching at a preparatory school. But in the autumn of 1904, he was called, on Parratt's suggestion, to Carlisle Cathedral, where, though legally only acting organist (for the aged H. E. Ford retained his freehold office), he had the full responsibility of a cathedral organist. In 1908 he accepted the post of organist of Canterbury Cathedral, but hardly had he done so, and before he could take up duty, he received an unsought invitation to become organist of Manchester Cathedral, whereupon he withdrew his acceptance of Canterbury. He was at Manchester from January 1909 to December 1918, and then succeeded Sir Frederick Bridge at Westminster Abbey in January 1919. It may be noted that the only one of these four important posts which he actually applied for was that at Canterbury. In his tenure at Carlisle, Manchester and Westminster certain features suggest themselves as relevant to his eventual work as director of the School of English Church Music.

The first is his rapport with the boys of his choirs and his interest in their welfare beyond practice room and choir stalls. At Carlisle, finding, as he wrote, that they had little in the way of corporate life or amusements, he at once made it his job to remedy this. Numerous outings to interesting and attractive places within reach of Carlisle by cheap railway excursion (then often costing no more than a shilling) were organised, and a choir club started for the older boys. He noted how this improved their enthusiasm, reacting favourably on their singing and indirectly enhancing their reputation in the city. In connection with the Sunday evening popular services in the Cathedral he established a separate voluntary choir of boys and ex-choristers. At Manchester he founded an Old Boys Association and started a scout troop for the

choristers. The deck cabin of an old Channel steamer was acquired and placed in a field near the sea shore at Rhyl, to which the boys were taken every year for a fortnight's holiday under his own direction. Similarly, a choristers' scout troop was formed at Westminster. He brought a field near his own country cottage in Buckinghamshire and set up a permanent camp for them with three old railway carriages. Each of his two sets of 24 choristers went to camp in turn every summer, singing on Sundays at some neighbouring village church. It was to meet these circumstances that his congregational Communion Service in C was written, his own choristers singing the descant part.

Another relevant feature was his successful organisation of large gatherings. Even in his short and early time at Barnet he had formed a Church Choral Union of neighbouring choirs and established annual festivals. For the second of these he secured as organist Charles Macpherson, then sub-organist of St Paul's Cathedral, who was greatly struck by the result. With our knowledge of what Nicholson was later to accomplish with the SECM, Macpherson's tribute is remarkably significant:

You seemed to obtain the best possible results with most indifferent material, and this, too, with a class of music far in advance of many other such festivals ... It points to a very great amount of organising power on your part, for everything was performed as though the thing were an ordinary everyday occurrence ... your undoubted enthusiasm and skill had fired not only your own, but all the other choirs ... In short, you knew what was your ideal and you did your best to enforce it, and with great success.

Again, in Manchester he established a Diocesan Music Society which held both cathedral and local festivals, eventually encompassing no fewer than 4,000 members and 'seven or eight' branches. Westminster Abbey, for obvious reasons, was not a centre for any such diocesan or parochially grouped organisation, but Nicholson soon formed there a Special Choir, originally of 100 men and 100 boys, including the Abbey choristers.

In connection with the Abbey choir proper he was almost at once called upon as persuasive reformer. He obtained approval for the enlargement of the choir school so that he had two groups of 24 boys each who sang the services in shifts, thus dividing the strain. As to the men (lay vicars) he found conditions verging on the scandalous. Under the 'laudable customs' of the Abbey (using the expression in its legal sense) they enjoyed life tenure, with no obligation to attend rehearsals

and having the right whenever convenient to themselves to employ deputies. Even if a rehearsal were held (at an extra fee), a deputy might sing thereat, the lay vicar or even a different deputy appearing at the service. And they claimed the right to sing solo passages on certain days, irrespective of the music chosen or the choirmaster's wishes. Resolutely and as considerately as possible (though some friction was inescapable), this was put right, older men being persuaded to retire on a pension equal to their emoluments, and younger and better singers appointed on a more satisfactory footing as to both remuneration and duties. In passing, it is interesting to note Nicholson's tribute to the helpfulness in this matter of E. W. Barnes, then one of the Abbey canons, afterwards a controversial Bishop of Birmingham.

On now settling in London he joined the committee of the Church Music Society and soon became its chairman in succession to Sir Henry Hadow. The relevance of this to his subsequent work with the SECM will be explored later. Then, in 1927, occurred a tour of Canada undertaken jointly by him and E. H. Fellowes with a choir of 12 Abbey boys and the lay clerks of St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle. One cannot be moved by the plain, unvarnished tale of the triumphs of this as recounted by Fellowes in his *Memoirs of an Amateur Musician* (1946, pp.149-51). Yet, notable indeed in itself, it does not seem on the face of it to have been the sort of thing likely to have directed Nicholson's thoughts to his future work. Nevertheless, according to himself, so it did.

When he had been almost nine years at the Abbey, and a cathedral organist for 23 years, he took the crucial step of giving up his position in order to devote himself to a new organisation of his own creation. Late in 1927 he submitted his resignation. On 6 December of that year, at a meeting convened by him and held in the Jerusalem Chamber of Westminster Abbey, it was resolved on the proposition of Sir Walford Davies, seconded by Sir Hugh Allen, 'that a Company . . . to be called "The School of English Church Music" be formed *on the lines laid down by Mr Sydney H. Nicholson* (present author's italics); and early in 1928 he played for his last service as organist of the Abbey.

The background to this decision must, so far as possible, be explored separately. Here it ought to be sufficient to bring this preliminary survey to an end by recording the fact. Nevertheless, it may be as well to refer to certain drifting rumours of which one used to be aware. They were to the effect that, towards the end of his time, Nicholson's tenure at Westminster was regarded as something less than satisfactory, and that differences with a new Dean (W. Foxley Norris, appointed in 1925) may have inclined him to resign independently of the prospective

establishment of the SECM. Certainly, though an able musician, he was not - as he freely acknowledged - in the front rank as an organist; nor, as reliable testimony reveals, did his choir training show signs of fine technical honing, whatever its other merits; and yet he had been invited to Westminster in the first place on the strength of his known work. Again, it is by no means unknown that the arrival of a new chief may be a disturbing factor. Norris seems to have been a strong rather than an emollient personality, and (so the rumour goes) regarded the music at the Abbey as inferior to what he had been accustomed to when Dean of York Minster.

However, speculation is idle, and may be worse. In his autobiography Nicholson says nothing at all about any of this. And a subtly implied extension of such rumours, to the effect that his resignation from the Abbey may have been intended to cover a perhaps obligatory retreat (and the foundation of the SECM therefore having been correspondingly fortunate for him), may be dismissed as both unsubstantiated and unworthy. It ought to be recorded that Foxley Norris took the chair at the meeting which resolved to establish a School of English Church Music, and that Nicholson in that connection said that his counsels had been of the greatest value. (p.187).

As Nicholson now turned from the life of a cathedral organist to his new task, the Archbishop of Canterbury created him a Doctor of Music, not only an enhancement of status but a sign of the personal as well as official approval and encouragement which Archbishop Lang thereafter continued to extend.

## II EMERGENCE OF THE SCHOOL OF ENGLISH CHURCH MUSIC

With reference, so it seems, to the period 1925-6, Nicholson wrote (p.185)

Ideas had been gradually forming in my mind that the time was approaching when I should turn my thoughts and energies away from cathedral work to other branches of church music. I had always been greatly interested in the music of parish churches, and my connection with the Church Music Society had increased that interest and shown me how much was waiting to be done. Then the Report of the Archbishops' Committee on Music in Worship had been issued and received with wide

approval and the question 'What next?' seemed to be demanding an answer. But it was clear that to organise such work on a scale that would be necessary if anything worthwhile was to be accomplished would be a whole-time job; and if I were to undertake it it would mean a great change in my life. However, these thoughts were only simmering ...

Then came the Canadian tour already mentioned, and though this had not in any way been connected with parish church music, somehow its effect was to strengthen these feelings.

During the long journeys [of this tour] I had plenty of time to think about future plans and to discuss ideas with the Dean of Windsor [Dr A. V. Baillie] and Dr Fellowes, and on my return to the Abbey, having seen the effect of a little 'missionary' work, the call seemed to be coming even more urgent. I had been a cathedral organist for nearly a quarter of a century, and if I was to do anything else with my life it was high time to make a change. So, after full consideration and many talks with those whose advice I valued, I decided to resign my office [as organist of Westminster Abbey] at the end of 1927. (pp.186-7.)

So matter-of-fact an account calls for some degree of amplification, for which we must cast our eyes back over the years. The Church Music Society to which he refers, and whose committee he joined on moving to the Abbey, had been founded in 1906 by the efforts of Miss Eleanor Gregory (daughter of the Dean of St Paul's Cathedral) and Lady Mary Trefusis (née Lygon) with the declared object of facilitating 'the selection and performance of the music which is most suitable for different occasions of Divine Worship, and for different types of choir'. Pursuing this, it paid much attention to the needs of parish churches, both in towns and in villages.

In the course of its first twelve years, various of its efforts adumbrated some eventual SECM activities. It issued lists of recommended anthems and services, classified according to degree of difficulty; an inexpensive Choir Book containing good texts of Responses, Litany, and so on; advisory pamphlets, including one on 'Music in Village Churches' and another (by Harvey Grace) on 'Music in Parish Churches - a plea for the simple'. By means of 'Hymn Conferences' it drew attention to hymn tunes yet to become popular, such as 'Monk's Gate' and 'Sine nomine'; and it published suitable music, including the extended chorale from Bach's Cantata 147, now specially furnished with original English verses beginning 'Jesu, joy of man's desiring' by Robert Bridges.

Here, then, were embryonic patterns of activity. And such efforts,

both admirable in themselves and well-intentioned, exerted a certain beneficial, if circumscribed, influence. But the Society commanded no adequate means of making any striking impact. It was a cottage industry struggling to meet the needs of a mass market, and no doubt those most in need of its goods were oblivious or heedless of it. Yet, in addition to what it modestly accomplished, the Society also served as a useful gathering point, a much needed focus of opinion. And when, as part of a general spirit of questioning and reconstruction after the Great War of 1914-19, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York in 1922 appointed a committee to consider the state of music in church, it was to the personnel of the Society's executive committee that they turned for a large proportion of its members (Nicholson of course being one), while its chairman, Earl Beauchamp, was the brother of Lady Mary Trefusis.

The resulting report, *Music in Worship*, ranged from well-tempered expressions of general principles to pointing out such details as the uneventful alto part of the hymn tune 'St Oswald', while dispensing many valuable and critical observations on current practice together with much sound advice on a wide variety of topics both musical and administrative. But reports in themselves achieve little; and as to machinery to implement its ideas this made two proposals. It suggested the establishment of a central council on church music and the formation, under episcopal sanction, of diocesan music committees together with the appointment of diocesan inspectors of choirs, analogous to diocesan inspectors of schools, and perhaps diocesan summer schools of church music.

All this for the most part remained a dead letter. As for the education of choirmasters and organists, the report observed merely that 'on the whole the best training available for a parish church organist is that to be obtained from a few years' work as pupil-assistant at a church where there is a good choir', supplemented by a knowledge of musical and liturgical history and 'broadened by a wider outlook and experience than one locality will supply'. But while lamenting the lack of this training and 'some such all-round experience and apprenticeship' it stopped short of proposals to remedy matters except to commend the choir-training examinations of the Royal College of Organists.

The full significance of Nicholson's rhetorical question, 'What next?' can thus be realised. As a start, the Church Music Society - and here, surely, we can see the guiding hand of its chairman - lost little time in doing what lay in its power to propagate the ideas of the report. In 1924, under its auspices, a voluntary contingent of boys and men from the Westminster Abbey Special Choir was made available under

Nicholson at something like fortnightly intervals to visit parishes by invitation to demonstrate a simple Evensong with suitable advice and explanation from him. The Society advanced the expenses, and also met the cost of a treat for the boys in the form of a camp holiday (a very Nicholsonian touch). By all accounts these demonstrations aroused very considerable interest in the parishes which had asked for them: between six and seven hundred people attended one such at St Matthew's, Upper Clapton, London.

This successful reaching out into parishes looked forward to that work 'in the field' which was eventually to become such a valuable feature of the SECM, even though for some time yet to come it was far from being Nicholson's chief consideration. Uppermost in his mind as the answer to 'What next?' was a firmly held concept of quite another kind - that of a central institution for the systematic professional training of church musicians. In October 1924 the Church Music Society Executive Committee minutes contain an early indication of his thoughts on this. 'It would seem desirable', he reported

that students should have an opportunity for definite study of church music of all kinds, with practical experience in choir training and in organ accompaniment, and also the study of the liturgical side of church music. To enable them to obtain this, it is desirable that their training should be at some place where there is a permanent choir, a good organ, competent teachers, and, above all, a church where they could attend frequent services ... and where they could become familiar with the best church music of all styles.

All these matters, then, help towards understanding the background personal to Nicholson against which that decisive meeting took place on 6 December (St Nicolas' Day) 1927. Before going further, something, if only in outline, should also be said about a wider background, involving ecclesiastical, musical, educational, and social considerations.

In the first place, it must be recalled that though church-going was by this time no longer so general as in Edwardian days, the idea of respectability connected with church attendances was yet by no means spent. Parish churches (and their choirs) still enjoyed a certain recognised stability. There was, moreover, well-nigh universal acceptance of a surpliced choir of men and boys seated on either side of a chancel, singing to the accompaniment of an organ situated as near as may be. The notion of a parochial choral service was widely acknowledged, whether in large central churches, churches in prosperous suburbs, down-town churches in mainly working-class areas,



country churches of Cranford-like villages, or humbler ones more remotely placed. This was a powerfully unifying factor, overlaying in some degree different types of churchmanship, 'High', 'Moderate', or 'Low', save in conspicuously exceptional instances, and irrespective of such matters as incense, candles, genuflections, and signs of the cross. It was the still strong surviving 'central Victorian tradition of choral worship' as Nicholas Temperley expresses it.<sup>1</sup>

Only the most advanced of Anglo-Catholic churches displaced Morning Prayer as the principal Sunday morning service, slightly curtailed on the first Sunday of the month to be followed without a break by the Ante-Communion Service. This norm involved sung responses, chanted canticles and psalms, sung Amens to collects, and from time to time an anthem. Many churches might essay a service setting of the canticles on special occasions; large town churches would probably do so more regularly, and sing anthems more frequently. But the ingredients were fairly standard. For the Ante-Communion Service, some sort of musical setting of the Responses to the Commandments and the Nicene Creed were generally used, the 1920s being the time when the birth-pangs of a more congregational approach to this were being felt, with the gradual spread of versions of Merbecke's setting and other essays of which Martin Shaw's Anglican Folk Mass was by far the most distinguished. And where the kind of music was concerned, whether for Morning and Evening Prayer of the Communion Service, both the poor and mediocre examples were written in a debased form of the best of the 19th century, so that even here there was unity of sorts, nothing approaching such a fundamental dichotomy as between organ and guitar, 'traditional' and 'pop', or any other present-day apposition.

This was still the age of the unselective elementary school which catered for children to the school-leaving age of 14, and most parishes had a Church of England school of this kind. Only under the most enlightened of municipal authorities was secondary education after the age of 10-11 provided on anything like the scale even of one to ten, and under many it would be less. Consequently most boys attending a parish elementary school remained there roughly up to the age at which voices changed. They had no homework to occupy them, and they lived within walking distance of the church. So here was a continuous source of what Nicholson considered the staple of church choirs - the boys, some of

whom would be the men of the future. If a choirmaster failed to attract and retain them, it was a mark of his own shortcomings.

Furthermore, social conditions provided few competing distractions. Some boys might prefer to be scouts (Nicholson would have said they could be both scouts and choirboys), or might belong to the Boys' Brigade, but there was little else in the way of organised evening activity, and the twice-weekly choir practices were an acceptable commitment. The same was broadly true of the adults. Many who had no advantage of musical education had good voices and enjoyed singing, and to them the church choir was a pleasurable activity (rather than a piece of religious work), with no overwhelming claims of other forms, and at a time when outings away from home on a Sunday were almost unheard of. Thus, without undue efforts of promotion, church choirs throughout the land and numbering many hundreds formed a definite element in the national musical life. Indeed, their very proliferation was one of the roots of the problem Nicholson faced. It was impossible that there should be sufficient competent organists and choirmasters to lead them all, or that all their members should be cultivated musicians.

Flowing over from the 19th century, the full tide of these factors was still evident in the first 20 years of the present century, the years of Nicholson's own formative experience. We now know how some (particularly) had begun to recede by 1930, though that may not have been so clear to contemporaries. As it was, Nicholson was just in time before the ebb flow became marked. By the time of his death every one of these factors had been transformed beyond recognition, most, if not all, of the certainties on which he could rely having vanished. In 1928, however, formidable though the battle ahead of him was by any standards, our analysis of the field shows that his target was a fixed one, and fairly well defined. There were plenty of choirs, and no undue problem of recruitment; there was a generally accepted type of service; and if quality varied too much, there was at least general acceptance of some vaguely felt standard of idiom for church music. Above all, the question of whether there should be any choir at all, if raised, was widely regarded as eccentric. So the problem of 'What?' could easily be stated: better quality of music suitable for varying standards of skill, a higher standard of performance, and a greater sense of liturgical fitness. The problem of 'How?' was less capable of formulation.

The words we italicised in the Resolution of 6 December 1927 (p.9) by which the School of English Church Music was founded were a clear indication that its activities were left to be shaped by Nicholson personally. He opened his address to that meeting by saying:

<sup>1</sup> *The Music of the English Parish Church*, 2 vols., Cambridge University Press, 1979, i, 316. For a brilliant analysis of the curiously disparate influences contributing to that, see especially his chapter 9, and summary on i, 314.



The proposal is, briefly, to secure the foundation of a school or college in London which will form a centre for the interests of Church Music. The scope of the School will be wide, and I do not think it would be opportune at the present stage to attempt to forecast too clearly exactly how it would work out.

He himself wrote later that it was understood that it should aim at '(a) giving direct help to existing choirs, and (b) providing practical training for church musicians by the foundation of a college for that purpose' (p.187). But nothing he said or wrote at the time shows that he envisaged such a bifurcation in any way. His idea was concentrated on the central educational institution, and whatever he may afterwards have written otherwise was retrospective in the light of what actually developed.

Letting no grass grow under his feet, he called his Provisional Council<sup>2</sup> together less than a fortnight later (19 December), and launched immediately into what to him was the prime concern, the establishment of a college. He unfolded a slightly grand scheme of a provost and 12 fellows ('non-executive functionaries with stalls in chapel') with the confused and anomalous idea that 'For the actual working of the School [note the word] it should form a "College" or Collegiate Body governed by Statutes under a Council which would be the legal entity and in supreme control'.

During the preparatory period of 1928, Nicholson devoted much energy, without anyone to help him, to addressing meetings wherever and whenever possible throughout the country, seeking support and explaining his plans. He remarks that this was to but little avail, and that far more was achieved by visits to choirs and congregations that asked for them. It is interesting that he should have valued the 'unfailing and generous support' given him in those early days by the press (p.208). Would such assistance for such a venture be forthcoming today? At the same time, as he tells us (p.190), he spent as many Sundays as possible 'in visiting churches of different types in all parts of the country and taking careful note of what I saw and heard'.

In October 1928 the property known as Bullers Wood, Elmstead Lane, Chislehurst in Kent on the outskirts of Greater London, was found for purposes of the proposed college, and purchased by Nicholson himself early in December. The SECM made certain annual payments to him either as rent or towards interest charges until he presented it

outright to the School. Clearly, his college was called into being equally by his inspiration and his financial resources: Set in ample grounds, not only was this property admirably suited for the purpose and capable of being made more so, but it had a certain distinction. In 1889 additions to it had been designed by Ernest Newton, RA, whose notice in the *Dictionary of National Biography, 1922-1930* singles out his work at Bullers Wood for mention, and it had some decorations of the same date by William Morris.

The premises thus secured, other necessary steps were promptly taken. It was named 'St Nicholas College' (soon, and ever after, 'the College of St Nicolas') and Nicholson was formally designated warden. The first choirboys,<sup>3</sup> 10 in all, were recruited, seven of them from the recently closed choir school of the late Duke of Newcastle at Clumber, Notts., while a financial gift in memory of the Revd H. H. Wright, precentor of Chester cathedral, made it possible to establish the choir school part of the scheme.

Harry Barnes, a former Abbey chorister, later a tenor, who had helped Nicholson with the boys on the 1927 tour of Canada, was appointed master of the choristers and teacher of singing to the students; a part-time chaplain (G. H. Salter, soon to become vicar of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Holborn, in the City of London) was secured; and for the rest - except in domestic affairs - the warden was prepared to be a host in himself. Thus, with only the barest minimum of resources, and premises not yet fully adapted, Nicholson (who clearly approved of the maxim *solvitur amulando*) was ready to welcome his first students, three men and one woman,<sup>4</sup> on 15 January 1929 and to hold his first service in the chapel the next day.

This aim, however difficult to reach, was at least clear-cut. Other aspects of the School's work, though not forgotten, were less easy to formulate. It is evident that for some considerable time to come there was much that was hesitant and tentative about these. In the end perhaps this was just as well. To have attempted, in so uncharted a field, to implement plans drawn up on a *tabula rasa* could have been disastrous. It was probably better to wait on events, seizing upon and developing opportunities as they disclosed themselves, which is what happened. But this lack of definition undoubtedly led to questions in some quarters

<sup>2</sup> Its four members were Sir Frederick Ratcliffe, Colonel A. D. Acland, Messrs J. A. Brewin and H. P. Chadwick-Healey - of whom the last had been a chorister under Nicholson at Chipping Barnet.

<sup>3</sup> They were charged ten guineas a term for board, lodging, and musical training at the College together with general education at Bickley Hall Preparatory School nearby.

<sup>4</sup> Fees for full-time resident students were in the range of 2½ or 3½ guineas weekly; the reason for the variation is unexplained.

about what the School had to offer choirs, especially as it was felt (and this notion was not entirely absent from Nicholson's mind) that affiliation was primarily a means of supporting the College. Matters were not improved by the perversity of the public in refusing to grasp the relationship between the larger body, the SECM, and the College, an element within it. Nicholson's own apparent stress on the College could not have been a help. In the first issue of *English Church Music* (January 1931) it was necessary for the editor (H. C. Colles) to drum that relationship home:

The School of English Church Music and the College of St Nicolas are not merely different names for the same thing ... The College ... is the most tangible outcome of the School's existence, and invaluable instrument for the attainment of the School's objects ... But it is no more the School itself than the War Office is the Army ... The School exists in its members ... Each one of the 500 affiliated parishes is to be regarded ... as a local branch of the SECM.

Having at first concentrated his Council's mind on the College, it was not until 1 June 1928 that Nicholson brought wider matters before it, and it was decided that the time had come for 'more definite particulars with regard to affiliation of choirs' to be circulated. However, in April the first issue of the *Quarterly News Sheet* had already disseminated some information on the subject:

It is often asked, 'How will the establishment of a School [again, note the confusion of words] of Church Music in London affect those who live and work at a distance?' and it seems that at the very outset some justification may be desirable when we are making an appeal for support from all over the country.

The School will, in the first place, form a centre from which all the various activities will emanate, but without such a centre any widespread activity is impossible.

The centre having been established, every effort will be made to supply the kind of practical help that is needed, and primarily of course to those *who help in the foundation and maintenance* (present author's italics).

Several detailed points were then made, such as (2) the right to attend chapel services; (3) the possibility that an affiliated parish might send its choirmaster for a course of training at a fee, as also members of choirs, including boys; (8) help might be given in finding candidates for vacancies as organists or choirmasters; (9) clergy might attend short

courses, taking occasional services in the chapel. In hoping that parish church choirs might become affiliated to the School it was stated that this 'would be understood to imply that they not only gave it material support, but that they wished to stand for the cause of good Church Music throughout the country'. Nothing whatever was said about visits to the choirs' own churches.

It will be seen from this how the scheme of affiliation might have seemed to present itself in no small measure as a means of support for a central institution, an impression likely to have been reinforced by the July issue of the *Quarterly News Sheet*:

It is increasingly evident that affiliation will afford a main source of income to the School, but its value to individual choirs lies in the fact that it will bring them into direct touch with the central organisation and so is likely to prove the surest means of making the work of the School practically effective.

Nevertheless, affiliations now began to come in, led by the first choir so to act, that of Childe Okeford, Dorset, enrolled on 21 July 1928. Meanwhile, Nicholson had been looking for someone to undertake the clerical duties which this wider work would involve, and made his needs known through suitable voluntary bodies. Hence, through Toc H, the SECM came to the notice of Mr H. L. A. Green, who had been a chorister of Durham Cathedral. In July he was appointed 'shorthand typist secretary', later becoming the first regularly constituted secretary of the School when it was eventually incorporated in 1930, and remaining until 1964. Beyond Nicholson's own important backing, the meagre funds raised by public appeal by December 1928 amounted to only £2,748; but to this was added a substantial sum from *Hymns Ancient and Modern*,<sup>5</sup> without which, as he said without mentioning himself, the School could not have started at all.

Thus, with a modest administration constituted, college premises secured for the reception of the first students, some boy choristers recruited, and a body of affiliated choirs established, the School of English Church Music, which 12 months earlier had been nothing but a proposition, was ready at the end of 1928 to set its machinery in motion.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholson was by now one of the Proprietors, as the trustees and managers of this enterprise were known.

From the point of view of the standard of mass performance, things were not made easy by the fact that each of the 182 contingents consisted on the average of no more than six people, men and boys. Nicholson is said to have described his own sensations in conducting as akin to 'taking a jellyfish for a walk on an elastic lead'. Nonetheless, *MT* remarked that his control was complete, and the event was generally thought to have justified itself well. Not only as a successful demonstration of principles, but in publicity and stimulus to those taking part, it was a decisive turning point for the movement.

Obviously there was now far greater inducement to affiliate. A Scottish choir wrote in the January 1931 issue of *ECM* to say that the effect of the London festival and affiliation 'has worked wonders for us', and a choirmaster from Bletchley, Bucks., wrote in *MT* of the same month eloquently stressing the value of affiliation. Early in that year a Choir Book, based on the music of the festival, was issued. It immediately became popular and was the forerunner of a long succession. In 1931 also six 10-inch gramophone records were produced to provide a simple model. Two of them contained the Nicene Creed sung to the Sarum plainsong with the rest of the Communion Service to Charles Wood's setting in the Phrygian Mode. The remaining four were devoted to canticles and psalms to Anglican chants, responses, and S. S. Wesley's Chant Evening Service in F. Next year these were followed by a further record explanatory of them.

Stirrings of regional activity now make themselves felt. Some emanated from the centre, some sprang up by local impetus. As examples of the first we find that in 1931 the secretary paid visits to certain dioceses and it was thus possible 'to provide practical help in a number of small churches'; an Easter residential instructional course was held in Scotland. As to the second, Nicholson directed a 'Instructional Service' arranged at St Margaret's, King's Lynn, and a gradually increasing number of area festivals or gatherings of choirs developed. Additionally, little by little, the College of St Nicolas began to be used, over and above its regular work, for short courses of many kinds. For instance, in January 1933 the first residential course for boys was held, and later that year a summer school was devoted to the needs of smaller churches.

From an early stage there had been a representative of affiliated choirs on the Council, to whom they were invited to put forward ideas for help (*ECM*, 1931, 4), but these developments obviously required more adequate framework. As a result of a conference of representatives of dioceses held in 1932 it was decided to make the diocese the

administrative unit under an area representative, with local representatives where suitable as a subsidiary tier. Care was taken to avoid a situation whereby representatives attempted to determine the policy of the School from diocesan level. They were specifically appointed (as purely honorary officers) with the approval of the *SECM* Council to represent the School in the diocese, and not vice versa.

Within three years of the Albert Hall festival a framework of regional organisation had been established, and numerous events - one-day schools, gatherings of choirs, short courses - had begun to spring up to form a long-enduring pattern. These were supplemented by useful music in the form of economically priced Choir Books, and from January 1931 the tentative *Quarterly News Sheet* was superseded by a proper quarterly journal, *English Church Music*, edited by H. C. Colles (chief music critic of *The Times*, and editor of the 3rd edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*). Besides news of *SECM* happenings, this provided advisory articles, reviews of new and suitable music, and various material about personalities and so on which would induce pride in belonging to the School. A perceptible change of emphasis now becomes apparent. From the beginning, Nicholson himself, despite his all-pervasive activity, had held no official post in the movement other than that of warden of the College of St Nicolas. Recognition of the other side of the work came when in August 1932 he was named as 'director' of the *SECM* as well as warden of the College. Commenting on improved standards which he found among choirs he said that 'a sense of responsibility seems to be created by the feeling that they belong to a great fellowship'. It is to his credit that, without diminution of his conception of the College as the prime element, he entered fully into the opportunities thus disclosed.

The impact which the School had already made was strikingly revealed at a second Festival of Church Music on 21 July 1933. This was boldly undertaken without the benefit of outside sponsorship, and those taking part had to bear, or raise, their own expenses. The underlying principles of 1930 were fully maintained, but this time the assembled choir was much larger (4000 voices) and the forum was the Crystal Palace. Nicholson used to the full the opportunities for spectacle which that provided. He organised two processions of choirs, each led by a conductor with a long wand, which approached the central transept from opposite directions each singing alternative verses of hymns, at first unaccompanied. This was a severe test of time and intonation, triumphantly mastered. When they had coalesced, a third procession of yet more choirs entered, together with the clergy and the Archbishop of

Canterbury (Lang). Striking though all this was, the important revelation of the event was the musical progress which the School's work had wrought during the past three years. *MT* saw this in the way the choir 'showed itself remarkably responsive to the conductor's requirements and sensitive to the different expressive intentions of the several compositions'. Basil Maine observed in the *Yorkshire Post* that Nicholson showed 'with what power he has been working through the School of English Church Music during the past four years', while Eric Blom (who had no noticeable bias towards anglican church music) wrote in the *Birmingham Post* that 'the choral tone was magnificent and the unanimity quite as great as one has a right to expect under Crystal Palace conditions. The effect as a whole was truly impressive, and the material as such evidently first-rate'. (These, and other complimentary press notices, were reprinted in ECM, 1933, 100-101). In a personal note to me at the time on a different subject, H. C. Colles added that he had not expected the assembled singers would 'show themselves so real a choir' as they had proved.

After this, no one could pretend that the SECM was not part of the ecclesiastical map of the United Kingdom. All its main types of activity had now been established, to proceed until the outbreak of war in six years' time. It is not required here to provide a chronicle of all its courses, gatherings, and festivals up and down the country. But three general characteristics may be noted.

Statistics of affiliated choirs, if analysed according to dioceses, show an uneven distribution, for which there may be various reasons, local attitudes strong among them; but much of the more successful activity must have been attributable to the influence of particular area representatives. Especially keen and thorough, for example, was Mr T. L. Duerden, organist of Blackburn Cathedral and area representative for that diocese. In 1935 he could report organisation by districts, and that in each large town the churches held a festival, while village churches combined in a festival at Blackpool. Moreover, a three-day visit from the director had been organised, and he addressed a conference of clergy and organists of affiliated choirs.

Secondly, there were signs of slight awareness that the college could be made useful, not by the unrealistic idea (to which Nicholson continued to cling) of part-time students spending perhaps a fortnight joining in the regular instruction and services, but by the organisation of specific, independent short courses. Holiday courses for choirboys proved a better idea than that announced in ECM, 1931, 4 of their coming during term time and attending a nearby elementary school.<sup>3</sup>

First started in January 1933, these were held annually and became quite popular, especially among choirs which had sent boys to previous courses. With adults, things seem to have been only tentative in these early years, though annual refresher courses for the RCO choir-training examinations were instituted, and in addition to regular summer schools the College and its grounds were used in 1936 and subsequently for a 'Church Singers Holiday Camp'. Experiments such as half-day instructional schools on three Saturday afternoons in that year do not seem to have been repeated. But this kind of use of a central institution showed the way for some later developments.

Thirdly, however stimulating and even exciting might be the regional festivals and gatherings, and above all the great London festivals (of which a third took place in 1936 at the Crystal Palace), one cannot doubt that the most penetrating influence of the School was achieved on the intimate level of advisory visits to choirs in their own churches. These developed chiefly from 1935, the year in which Nicholson obtained some relief from work at Chislehurst by the appointment of Dr Ernest Bullock as director of studies there. It was from that year, in which by September there were 1137 affiliations, that he kept a statistical record of visits, almost the entire burden of which he undertook personally. He paid 400 such visits in the period 1935-37, and in 1938, despite three months absence abroad, he visited 75 choirs. It may well be thought that he brought a unique combination of gifts to this kind of work. His earliest experiences had given him an understanding of relatively unselected material; and he was a skilled teacher, possessed of undoubted musical expertise combined with some indefinable attribute which enabled him without any sentimental relationship to secure the loyalty and evoke the keenness of boys. In his zeal he took care, unlike some, not to spoil his case by ruffling feathers. Supposing an organist, well esteemed as a musician in his own neighbourhood but working on lines which Nicholson considered in need of improvement, he reflected in his autobiography how unfitting it would be to criticise such a man in any way that might lower his prestige.

There is one more pre-war enterprise to chronicle, and that is the overseas expansion of the School. The affiliation of the choir of the church of St Michael and All Angels, Colombo, Ceylon in 1931 is a minor landmark, but there was no significant SECM activity outside the United Kingdom until after 1935. During 1934 Nicholson received an invitation from the Australian Church Music Commission to visit

<sup>3</sup> This idea was successfully implemented once, but no more.



Australia, which was no doubt particularly welcome to him on account of family links. He spent the European winter of 1934-5 not only in Australia but in New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. In these places he came face to face with conditions different not only in degree, but, even more, in kind from those at home, and often a different atmosphere of worship. He recorded how few choirs had ever heard any church music performed except by themselves, and noted loud organ-playing; and too often poor quality of music. Most of all he was struck by the general constitution of choirs consisting of women and men, the English form of boys and men, on which his own outlook was exclusively based, having no roots. Diligent though he was in explaining and demonstrating his principles and in showing what his School had to offer, it was in the nature of things that over such vast tracts of territory there was little he could accomplish single-handed. But on the one hand the tour gave him a wider outlook and knowledge of different conditions and requirements, and on the other encouraged some affiliations and opened the way for expanding influence. In May and June of 1938 he made a further tour of Canada and the USA.

Ten years earlier, Nicholson's scheme barely existed except on paper. Now, though precarious financially, it was vigorously and beneficially active over a wide area in the many ways we have observed. In the summer of 1938 the King's Birthday Honours justly recognised his work by a knighthood. In September 1939 there were just over 1,500 affiliated choirs at home and abroad, and prospects seemed set fair when the outbreak of war in that month rudely intervened and all activities were intermitted.

#### IV WORK AND LIFE AT THE COLLEGE OF ST NICOLAS, 1929-39

As Nicholson pointed out at the inaugural meeting in December 1927, there were obvious shortcomings in what he called the professional training of church musicians. They had (he said) no opportunity to train a choir or accompany a service under expert guidance, or of imbibing the influence of the proper surroundings.<sup>1</sup> A young enthusiast ought to have the opportunity to try his hand at practical work 'while living in an atmosphere where it would be full of interest', and he should have a

working knowledge of the history and literature of church music, and above all these musicians 'should be sympathetic and educated churchmen'. What, he asked, was needed for this? He supplied his own answer thus:

(a) A chapel with frequent services of all types ranging from the simplest sort of service suitable for a village church to the more elaborate. The services must be such as a student may meet with when he is called to take up work outside - no one style of music or brand of churchmanship. Here the student would learn to train the choir, accompany the services, sing and take part in them.

(b) A nucleus of resident boy choristers.

(c) A hostel, which would also cater for short courses and summer schools as well as offer something of a collegiate life.

(d) A staff consisting of a warden or director of studies and the services of lecturers or advisers.

Though one might reflect that a professionally-trained church musician was not likely to seek appointment in a village church, it would be hard to improve on this diagnosis or list of desiderata. But the task of creating the necessary institution was of such breath-taking audacity as to have daunted many another than Nicholson. And yet, within 13 months of the meeting at which he spoke thus, such an institution, even if as yet only fragile, was ready for operation. Many of his well-wishers expressed doubts. It was only achieved by his total commitment to the idea, his completely single-minded pursuit of it, and his own financial bounty, a measure equally of his generosity and of his personal belief in his scheme.

The College was absolutely central to his ideas, and without it the SECM to him would have been unthinkable. As he puts it, this was something without which 'the scheme [i.e., the SECM] could not be regarded as fully launched' (p.215). We have just seen how he looked forward to a hostel which would offer his students 'something of a collegiate life'. It does not in any way detract from one's sense of his disinterested endeavours to say that a little of his attachment to it must have arisen from his love of the apparatus of collegiality, in which it enabled him innocently to indulge. We have noted, too, that before anything had become a reality he immediately put forward the idea of a provost and fellows ('with stalls in chapel'). He delighted to arrange

<sup>1</sup> This seems to overlook the articulated pupil system when it was properly applied - perhaps an important qualification. Henry Coleman, for instance, organist of Peterborough Cathedral, had been such a pupil under Nicholson himself at Carlisle.



occasional picturesque ceremonial.<sup>2</sup> He clothed his regular choir in distinctive light blue cassocks to mark them off from mere visitors or auxiliaries. The full-time students who held scholarships wore gowns. He himself was known as 'the warden' and it seems there was a high table. Eventually the idea of nominal fellows of the College bore fruit in 1936 when some distinguished musicians were appointed in March and gathered together at the College in December.<sup>3</sup>

All this apparently answered to something in him; and who would grudge it? As a young man he had dreamed of one day founding a college of church music, recalling what Sir Frederick Ouseley had done in the mid-19th century. Lady Nicholson reminded her son of this when the College of St Nicolas was established. But his purpose at Chislehurst was wider and more effective than that of Ouseley, who had no intention of providing a curriculum and instruction for students, and whose foundation, St Michael's College, Tenbury was simply a body of people - choirmaster, organist, lay clerks, boy choristers - to furnish choral services of a high standard in the adjoining church of the parish of which Ouseley was the incumbent.

We shall later on consider some questions hanging over Nicholson's project. But first let us see it at work. As soon as it opened, regular daily choral services in chapel ensued forthwith.<sup>4</sup> Throughout its existence the alto, tenor, and bass parts of the choir were supplied by members of the staff and students. This was not ideal for producing a polished

<sup>2</sup> For instance, in the final issue of *St Nicolas* (November 1939) he took pride to recall the full pageantry of the official opening of the College on 3 July 1929 when 'there were contingents of men and boys from Westminster Abbey, Rochester Cathedral and the Westminster Abbey Special Choir. These, together with several Doctors of Music and the Clergy and Archbishop [of Canterbury] with his attendants, formed an imposing procession, which first of all assembled in the courtyard outside the main entrance to the College'.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the chairman of the Council, Sir Arthur Somervell, they were: Sir Walter Alcock, Sir Hugh Allen, Sir Ivor Atkins, Sir Edward Bairstow, (Sir) John Dykes Bower, (Sir) Ernest Bullock, Sir Walford Davies, the Revd E. H. Fellowes, Dr Henry G. Ley, and (Sir) Stanley Marchant - a predictable and (perhaps inevitably at first) largely conventional list. Gerald Finzi and Ralph Vaughan Williams were also invited, but both declined because of the implied acceptance of the complete doctrine of the Church of England. That implication was subsequently removed, but neither Finzi nor Vaughan Williams ever became fellows of the College of St Nicolas.

<sup>4</sup> A two-manual organ had been given by Mrs Cleverley, of Wallington, and was re-constructed free of charge by Messrs Harrison and Harrison. A chalice and patten were presented by the Society of the Faith, and the Westminster Abbey choristers of the years 1918-28 gave an altar cross and candlesticks. In December 1931 a completely new Harrison organ was given in memory of Colonel J. A. Man Stuart, while the former instrument was retained for student use. Nicholson's old choristers showed him further remembrance. In 1931 those of Chipping Barnet, Carlisle, Manchester, and Westminster combined to present a credence table, for which occasion Leslie Heward, his most brilliant protégé, wrote a 'Choral Song for a Reunion'. His original head chorister at Carlisle (A. J. Reeves), who sent his son to the College, gave a recedens in 1935.

instrument. In practice it was well apt for giving student choirmasters experience in dealing with whatever material presented itself. At first only Messrs Barnes (tenor) and Green (alto) were available to supplement the very few students, in addition to any part which the warden chose to bear. However, the loyal support of three ex-Abbey choristers, H. V. Abbott, Bertram Piller, and Edred Wright, provided a fuller body for Thursday evenings and Sundays.

Quite soon a link was established with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Holborn, and the services on those two weekly occasions were sung there. This was a wise step, encouraging an outward look and drawing attention to both the College and the SECM. At first the Thursday evening service was preceded by an 'open' rehearsal and followed by a lecture on some aspect of church music, and there was also Sunday evensong. Gradually, however, these were abandoned for want of support, and only Sunday morning service remained at Holborn, at which a model of organ accompaniment for the purpose was provided by Nicholson personally.

The original skeletal staff was supplemented for plainsong by Miss Forbes Close - a noticeable exception to Nicholson's all-masculine approach to church music and life in general.<sup>5</sup> One would like to know something more about her. Bit by bit, as work expanded and meagre resources permitted (for we may be sure that no-one was highly paid) others were added. In September 1931 the important appointment was made of the Revd C. S. Phillips, DD, as resident chaplain, and some time later C. H. Phillips (a former student, afterwards D.Mus) became senior tutor (their identity of surname led to the former's name the latter as 'Homonym', a nickname then generally adopted). Gerald Knight (like C. S. Phillips, a former student), took over as resident tutor in plainsong. In the summer of 1935, by which time Nicholson's expanding work outside took him away a good deal, Dr Ernest Bullock became visiting director of studies, coming down once a week for the purpose. These four, together with Mr Barnes and supported as much as possible by the warden, constituted a teaching force of formidable quality. Lists of 'external teaching staff' such as the ten named, for example, in the 1936 Annual Report, included notables like Benjamin Dale and Herbert Howells for composition, Gordon Jacob for orchestration, Harold Craxton for pianoforte, and C. H. Trevor for organ. This looks

<sup>5</sup> For part of the domestic services of the College Nicholson employed a series of 'house boys', adolescent ex-choristers of affiliated choirs, on whose behalf he took pains to find subsequent employment.

impressive, but one suspects that they had merely indicated availability if required rather than that they constituted an active teaching body. Be that as it may, the College was certainly served throughout by many visiting lecturers, who must have given their services freely or for very little: H. C. Colles, E. H. Fellowes, Anselm Hughes, Martin Shaw, Royle Shore, C. Hylton Stewart, and others, names constituting a roll-call of the most eminent experts of the day in church music.

The best way to give an idea of the instructional routine is to reproduce two representative schedules, one of the scheme of lectures for 1930-31, the other of the weekly services planned for the autumn term of 1938, as given respectively in the *Quarterly News Sheet*, October 1930, and *St Nicolas*, October 1938.

### **I. Weekly lectures (four courses of 10 termly lectures in each).**

#### **1. History of English Church Music.**

1st term - Earliest period, with the rise of polyphony.

2nd term - Tudor period and the Restoration.

3rd term - Eighteenth century to modern times.

Additional - Singing music of different periods, both at lectures and in the chapel services.

#### **2. Plainchant.**

1st term - Elements and history.

2nd term - Teaching of plainchant.

3rd term - Accompaniment of plainchant.

Additional - Special practical study of the more elaborate examples of plainchant.

#### **3. Choir Training, etc.**

1st term - Technique of choir training, voice production, etc.

2nd term - Choir management and music of the parish church.

3rd term - Organ accompaniment, etc.

Additional - Singing classes at Bickley Hall School.

Extemporisation and general music classes.

#### **4. Liturgical study.**

1st term - The Psalter.

2nd term - The Prayer Book, with principles of ceremonial.

3rd term - Hymnology.

## **II. Services**

### **Sunday**

10 am.

Choir practice, followed by service at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Holborn, on 1st Sunday in month.

6 pm.

Choir practice and service.

### **Monday**

6 pm.

Choir practice and service (cathedral type).

### **Tuesday**

7.40 am.

Service (small church type)

6.15 pm.

Choir practice and service. Men only - plainsong.

### **Wednesday**

7.40 am.

Service (small church type)

### **Thursday**

7.30 am.

Choral celebration

6.15 pm

Choir practice and service (parish choir type) taken by students under direction of Dr Ernest Bullock

### **Friday**

7.40 am.

Service (Litany).

6.15 pm.

Choir practice and service (boys only)

### **Saturday**

7.40 am.

Service (parish church type)

6 pm.

Choir practice and service (parish church type)

At the outset Nicholson set himself against any idea that the College should grant diplomas (an attitude one can only applaud). When the matter was raised in 1936 it led to something very different, the Archbishop of Canterbury's diploma in church music (ADCM), awarded with the authority of the Archbishop after examination conducted jointly by the SECM and RCO and open only to those fellows of the RCO who hold its choir-training diploma. It did not require study at the College.<sup>6</sup>

Insofar as the curriculum of the College itself had any general aim, it was perhaps towards the RCO choir-training diploma (CHM). But it had something to offer people such as Gerald Knight, C. H. Phillips, D. Mulgan, K. F. Malcollmson, and John Lea-Morgan with university courses behind them, no less than young men straight from school who would have tuition in organ-playing and paper work of a kind directed towards an external B.Mus degree and/or the ARCO and FRCO diplomas.

No standards were abated in any way. Sir David Willcocks, who was there for a year before going up to Cambridge, still esteems the value of Nicholson's insistence on disciplined, contrapuntal extemporisation in definite form, of Barnes's singing tuition, and of C. S. Phillips's lectures on the psalms. Gerald Knight wrote that 'playing for services was by no means unalloyed pleasure: we knew only too well that when we operated under the eagle eye and keen ear of Sydney Nicholson that nothing we did would escape him: a doubled leading note or major third would incur his severe disapproval in the post mortem following the service'. Ronald Tickner recalls the ordeal of taking a choir practice. 'But what an education!', he says, "with Ernest Bullock singing wrong notes on purpose". Peter Craddy attributes his life-long love of plainsong to what he learned at the College, and to Barnes's singing of it.

Student life was by no means monkish or spartan - good food catering for large appetites is reported, table tennis, billiards, and snooker, also unlimited hot baths. 'We were well looked after' is one comment. The small number of students meant plenty of facilities for organ practice, and there were also two pedal pianos, a good collection of gramophone records of orchestral music, and opportunities for two-piano playing. Concentration though there was on church music, this was not by any means necessarily exclusive. David Willcocks played the solo part in Rakhmaninov's Piano Concerto No 2 while Ronald Tickner played the orchestral part on a second piano. And there were lighter-

<sup>6</sup> At the first examination for the ADCM in October 1937 the five successful candidates included Gerald Knight and C. H. Phillips. Of the five, only one (Knight) became a cathedral organist.

hearted things such as a production of Nicholson's 'detective' opera, *The Guggenheimer Emerald*, and his hilarious *Passionate Peter* in which a vicar, organist, and others turn to piracy in their spare time.

A brave, happy, and beneficent venture indeed! But its very existence up to the outbreak of war in September 1939 was never more than tentative. It was open not just to younger people who could stay for a year (or more) of regular study, but to older ones who might only be able to take one term, and even to others who might join for just a week, being regarded temporarily as ordinary students, sharing the communal life and its normal routine of work. It was even possible for someone at work all day to reside in the College and take part in what was available in evenings and at weekends. It was hardly to be expected that it would fill up quickly, but subsequent recruitment was never satisfactory, even for what was a small institution. It was reckoned that in its pre-war existence of ten years and two terms there had been just 89 students, including any who had stayed for at least (but no more than) one term. In addition there had been 170 who had come for short periods. (Council Minutes, May 1943).<sup>7</sup>

Disappointment was frequently expressed, and one supposes that even if so small an institution had always been full it could never have been financially self-supporting. Rarely did the number of students who at any one moment followed its regular curriculum exceed 12. Not only were there seldom so many, but such a number was sustained only for short periods. As it was, the College represented something of a financial drain on the whole School. Evidently a real crisis came in 1936 when Nicholson had to urge the Council that 'the maintenance of a college as a centre of study and demonstration was of vital importance to the work of the SECM as it alone provided a concrete embodiment of the ideals for which the SECM was founded'. Even so, misgivings were such that it was only agreed to continue with it for the time being, 'at any rate until July 1939' (a date which was to prove prophetic), and then review matters. Unsuccessful attempts were made at about this time to establish some kind of recognised link, first with the Theological Department of King's College, London, then with the College of St Mark and St John, a Church of England Training College for men teachers. Nicholson

<sup>7</sup> These two figures refer to the regular curriculum, not short courses organised as such, summer schools, and camps, all of which Nicholson was taking into account when at the 10th Anniversary Meeting of the SECM (December 1937) he said that 'the number of students who have in one way or another come under its [the College's] influence runs into several hundreds'. After the outbreak of war in 1939 he went further and said that people 'numbering thousands and drawn from all parts of the world' had 'been brought directly under its influence'. (*St Nicolas*, November 1939).

himself, while staunchly affirming its value, recognised in his address at the 10th anniversary in December 1937 that the College was 'costly child of the SECM, it is true'.

Its purposes were so self-evident, and what it offered was so thorough and of such quality, that the question why it was not more flourishing thrusts itself forward. Nicholson was apparently oblivious of, or else he confidently chose to ignore, certain factors about recruitment not under anyone's control. The essence of the curriculum was supplementary to, not in place of, what was otherwise available and that meant extra cost and time to young musicians after training elsewhere.

Only a very few could undertake this. On the other hand, if it sought also to give what was available elsewhere (pianoforte, composition, etc.) this was unnecessary duplication and a substantial financial strain; and it could not provide the scope of a full conservatory course, for example a second study in the form of an orchestral instrument. Those considerations related to young men of undergraduate or immediate post-graduate age. Beyond them it was hardly likely that existing parish church organists would find it possible to give up a few consecutive weeks, let alone a term or a year, to attend such a college. They had their livings to earn, whether as professional musicians or in other ways. It is paradoxical that the College did make an impact through a group which, in his outline at the inaugural meeting in December 1927, Nicholson had considered outside its prospective scope, namely those training to be cathedral organists (or for corresponding posts). Some of these put in a year before taking up an organ or choral scholarship; others came for a time after their university course.

It is strange that though overtures were made to King's College, London, at to the College of St Mark and St John, no effort was made to establish some kind of recognised relationship with London conservatories of music. While a student pursued his full studies at one of these (probably with organ as his first study), residence at Chislehurst would have been a heaven-sent solution of his lodgings problem and furnished facilities for practice, and the other provision there for singing in and accompanying services, training a choir under supervision, and lectures in liturgiology would have made the ideal supplement which a conservatory could not offer. Two or three students did follow such a plan, but on a purely personal basis, in connection with the Royal College of Music. One cannot but feel that a more formal link on such lines, perhaps with a common admissions policy, might have given Nicholson's ideal of a college of church music a much better chance of permanence.

The outbreak of war in 1939 compelled the College of St Nicolas to close 'for the duration'. And although Nicholson was to see that it was reconstituted as soon as possible thereafter, this is the most opportune point to salute a bold and determined venture, and what it succeeded in achieving with almost every card stacked against it.

## V

### THE WAR YEARS, 1940-45

From the very nature of its activities, the SECM was vulnerable in every way to the immediate impact of war conditions. As men of military age began to be mobilised for the services, and others were occupied by spare-time civic defence duties, choirs were depleted and organ stools vacated. Enormous numbers of boys and girls of school age from London and certain other large urban centres were dispersed throughout the countryside. Street lighting was forbidden in hours of darkness, and torches had to be heavily occluded. Anticipation of air attack discouraged anything that gathered people together. Public transport was severely restricted. Until, bit by bit, some excesses were seen to be needless and adjustments began to be made so far as possible to suit new conditions, all of this put the School virtually into suspense.

The College having closed, Nicholson seemed for the first time in his life to be without work to do. Now well advanced in his 65th year, he could not have been blamed for lapsing into retirement at such a juncture. But, having surveyed the state of affairs, before the end of the year he produced a pamphlet on *War-time Choir Training*, stressing the importance of boys as choirs became depleted of men.<sup>1</sup> Pursuing this, he prepared an SECM Choir Book of music for boys' voices which was published early in 1940. This provided anthems and settings of the evening canticles as well as psalms and hymns, designed for unison or 2-part singing together with some descants. Furthermore, in the first half of 1940 he personally visited as many as 166 choirs, and directed several short courses for boys in various centres.

The country presently realised that though civil life was restricted, it was not so completely paralysed as had been thought. In August 1940

<sup>1</sup> He even conceded that there might be a use for girls in the chancel 'if you are short of boys'. However, perhaps fearful of yielding too much, he added, 'but let the girls feel that their *special job* is to lead the singing in the congregation in the nave'.



Nicholson took himself to St Michael's College, Tenbury, where for three years he acted in place of the organist and choirmaster who had joined the forces, and, taking a nearby house, he temporarily established the headquarters of the SECM there with the assistance of Mr Green, and proceeding to revive it. By refusing to sit down under discouragement, and realising that there was yet something more for him to do, he not only kept the School alive, but succeeded in extending it. Some indication of how things proceeded is that after a slight drop in 1940-41 there were 1,600 affiliated choirs in September 1942, 100 more than on the outbreak of war, and that by the end of the war they exceeded 2,000. In its small but individual way his work contributed to the morale of national life in wartime. It was not without justification that in 1945 the School received recognition in the royal command that it should be known as The Royal School of Church Music.

Apart from office work he was entirely single-handed until in 1943 Hubert Crook was appointed as 'commissioner', and one is astonished at the vigour with which he prosecuted his travels. Conditions were awkward. Advertised trains might not run, and when they did they were always crowded with standing passengers; country bus services were sparse and did not run late in the evening; and though his work no doubt qualified him for a supplementary petrol ration, journeys by car had to be planned with care and ingenuity, and were not made easier by the removal of all road signs. Other travellers by road would now and again be treated to the sight of the elderly director of the SECM, knight and doctor of music, proceeding on a contraption called an Autobike which he acquired in 1941 to conserve petrol. Under such circumstances, and in addition to his work at St Michael's College, he cheerfully visited choirs in all parts of the country. We content ourselves with two statistics: in a 3-month period in 1941 he paid 62 visits to choirs ranging from Aberdeen to Truro, and in 1942 he visited 77 choirs, quite apart from courses and festivals. Gerald Knight records Nicholson's own delightful recollection of a Cornish church where he said he found 'four little boys as keen to sing to him as he was to listen'.

Such visits continued throughout the war years, side by side with a considerable and successful development of holiday residential courses for choirboys, some of them held at St Michael's College, others elsewhere. But before going further one must not fail to record how, in his work at St Michael's, he did not omit to practise what he preached in the way of recruitment of boys. It was wholly characteristic of his gifts and outlook that, in conditions not necessarily calling for such a thing, and in a neighbourhood so sparsely and thinly populated as to make

some think it impossible, he gathered together and trained a parish choir of ten boys (no voice-trial exacted!) who joined as far as possible in singing with the College choir on Sundays in term time, and carried on by themselves during the holidays.

The surprising amount of activity in the war years of 1941-45 was so large that a full account would make a wearisome recital. One can only make such selective mention as will give some representative idea. In 1941 there were courses for boys at Betteshanger School, Chipping Sodbury, Glos., and two at Tenbury. A new departure was in response to an invitation from Gloucester Cathedral to arrange a festival of public school choirs on the Tuesday in Whitsun week. Rather ambitiously at the time, a summer school for adults ('serious students') was planned for Tenbury, but it does not appear whether sufficient applicants were forthcoming.

In 1942 it was possible to organise a festival of 400 boys in Westminster Abbey, at which *MT*, 1942, 215 observed that their management of 'the little turns and runs with suppleness [in Bach's 'My heart, ever faithful'] was a wonderful experience'. Similar festivals with even more boys were held at the Abbey in 1943, 1945 and 1946. Reporting on the first in an extended notice, *MT*, 1943, 214, commented approvingly on Nicholson's devoting much time and attention to responses, monotoning, reciting and chanting, but added that nevertheless in the anthems and so on 'the [650] youngsters came through with flying colours', especially in singing the big S. S. Wesley solo 'Who can express?' in unison. The 1945 festival was graced by the presence of the then Queen Consort and Princess Margaret. The event planned for 1944 had to be cancelled - this was the year of Hitler's aerial rockets - but Nicholson tenaciously rescued as much as possible by a substitute occasion at St Mark's, Milverton.

Meantime a new and distinct departure was initiated in 1942 when for a fortnight in August the SECM gathered 50 boys from cathedrals, parish churches (including 'some of the smallest country villages') and public schools to take over all the services in Gloucester Cathedral. The significance of this is that it was not exclusively concerned with trebles: alto, tenor, and bass parts were supplied by the older boys from public schools. Followed by similar arrangements in Durham and Norwich Cathedrals in 1944 and 1945, this was the harbinger of a continuing series of such RSCM 'Cathedral Courses'.

The year 1945, by which time Nicholson had Hubert Crook's assistance as commissioner, was one of remarkable activity for the School, as the country turned from war. The events are worth tabulating.



**Residential courses for boys:** in January at Summerfield School, Oxford; three at Easter (Tenbury, Barnard Castle School, Hillside School, Godalming) intended to cater for about 200 boys in all; one in September.

**Festivals:** Wolverhampton, Brighton, Warwick.

**One-day schools:** Ringmer, Willaston, Billingham-on-Tees, Roker.

**Instructional courses:** 'various places', including one for Scottish choirboys at Roslin Castle.

**Summer school for clergy and organists,** St John's School, Leatherhead, September.

Some details of the course at Summerfields, where Nicholson had six assistants, are worth citing as probably typical. There were two choral services each day; there was instruction in the rudiments of music, musical history, and sight singing; and religious, vocal, and physical training for good measure (*MT*, 1945, 89).

Well before this, Tenbury had been found too inaccessible to be a satisfactory base for the work, and in October 1943 headquarters were moved to Leamington Spa. Even earlier, thoughts had begun to turn to possible post-war arrangements. Nicholson of course took the re-opening of the College of St Nicolas for granted, and as a result of contacts with Canterbury Cathedral a decision was taken in January 1943 to re-establish it as soon as conditions might permit in a house in the Cathedral precincts. One is struck by the fact that such a forward decision was confidently reached even before German/Italian resistance in North Africa was defeated, and well before the allied invasion of continental Europe was even begun. In the event, the whole establishment of the RSCM moved to Canterbury late in 1945 after the cessation of hostilities.

## VI CONCLUSION

It was calculated towards the end of 1943 (*ECM*, 1943, 25) that for all purposes (meaning rent and office costs, also secretarial and clerical salaries, travelling expenses, and costs of producing the quarterly magazine) the School's total annual income (besides, of course, the director's services, given without charge) was no more than £2,000. Only support from *Hymns Ancient and Modern* made ends meet. With this in mind, and recalling the precarious pre-war financial state at Chislehurst, it must have been a robust act of faith to re-start the College of St Nicolas. It began its work again at the end of January 1945 in Canterbury, the College proper being in the Cathedral precincts, the students' hostel with the RSCM headquarters not too far away at Roper House in the town. Daily services for College purposes were held in the eastern crypt of the Cathedral, made available by the Dean and Chapter.

There were two differences from the arrangements at Chislehurst, the first of which achieved a huge economy. No residential choir school was set up. Instead, boys were recruited to form a choir for the weekday services from the choirs of parish churches in Canterbury, while on Sundays the students attended the Cathedral services as appropriate. This probably provided better representative material for student choirmasters than the more selective type of boy likely to be chosen for a choir school.

The second change was that the director of the RSCM was no longer warden of the College, and did not reside in it. Nicholson lived in his own cottage at Woodchurch within easy reach of his headquarters, and Gerald Knight became warden, combining the duty with his work as organist of Canterbury Cathedral. It was no doubt wise for Nicholson not to resume this burden, partly because of his age, partly because of expansion of the other side of the work. Dr Alan K. Blackall was appointed sub-warden and trained the choir for a term until Edred Wright became choirmaster. Knight indicates that there was a certain air of re-invigoration as some younger men now released from the forces made use of the College for a while in their keenness to get back to church music. And the College lost no time in instituting appropriate short courses for the RCO choir-training examinations, the Archbishop's diploma, and for choirmasters of village churches.

Directing the School from the centre, Nicholson pursued his own activities with unabated vigour, on lines by now well established, until after returning from a course at Rossall School in Lancashire after Easter

in 1947 he suffered a slight stroke. He recovered sufficiently to be present at RSCM festivals in Canterbury Cathedral on 10 and 17 May, but died on 30 May in hospital after a further stroke. He lies buried in the cloisters of Westminster Abbey.

He had the satisfaction of living through the war years to see his creation re-established on the familiar lines of his conception, but was spared the winds of change - social, educational, ecclesiological - now beginning to gather to produce new conditions and altered tasks which at his age he might well have been ill-equipped to face. With a man of his years at the helm, his Council could not have been unmindful of the day when he would be removed. Nevertheless, the departure of his dominant and idiosyncratic personality, and also the loss of his services, created a shock.

As is well known, three honorary associate directors - (Sir) John Dykes Bower, (Dr) Gerald H. Knight and (Sir) William McKie - were nominated to hold the fort until a new regime began when Gerald Knight became director in January 1953, to be followed by the removal of the School, with its College, to Addington Palace, Croydon, in January 1954, and eventually to the inevitable abandonment of the idea of a full-time course of instruction. All this, and more, is another story.

Reviewing Nicholson's work, it is not difficult to make some criticisms from a retrospective position. It may be objected that he saw church choirs as consisting ideally of boys and men only; females might just be tolerated, *faut de mieux*. His view of Prayer Book worship was exclusively that of the choral service, in a form suited to parish churches. Although he acknowledged his starting point to be the 1922 report, *Music in Worship*, there is not much in his work relating to its recognition of congregational participation. It came to be thought a matter of criticism, even by one so sympathetic to the RSCM as Leonard Blake,<sup>1</sup> that in the [supposed] tension latent between choir and congregation, Nicholson's movement threw its weight into one side of the balance only. Some would consider his taste in church music unadventurous: a few representative stock classics of the Elizabethan and Jacobean period; a respectful glance at Blow and Purcell; then a leap to S. S. Wesley and over to Stanford and the inheritors of his tradition. He himself had been in a position to build his entire life around the practice of church music, and so was unable to understand that it might

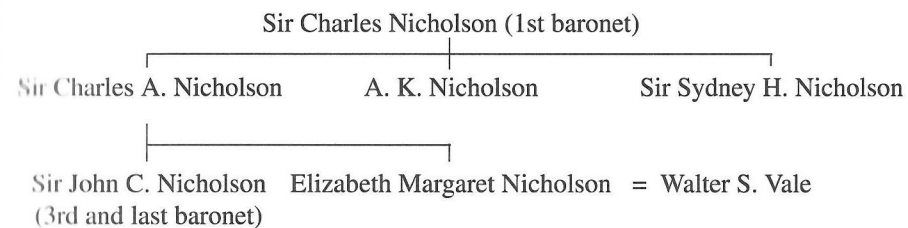
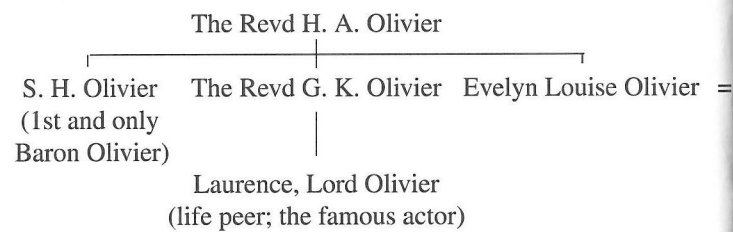
<sup>1</sup> Writing editorially in *ECM*, 1953, 4. The present author permits himself to say that he does not share this criticism in the particular form expressed.

exert less than complete compulsion over many choirmasters engaged day by day and week by week in other avocations, whether musical or not. His movement suffered a limitation in that it bore so emphatically and exclusively the imprint of his outlook alone, his few co-adjutors being among those who shared it completely.

Some of these points arise from differences of 60 years and more in time. If here and there we have smiled at his attitude to women and girls in choirs, it was the gentle smile of indulgent disagreement, not the scorn of today's aggressive feminism. In the 1920s and 30s only lone voices, generally considered eccentric, called for the reduction, or abolition, of the role of the choir. If Stravinsky's *Pater Noster* (let us say) or settings of the Mass by French composers found no part in his scheme, it is reasonable to consider that to have combined his other educational work with too innovatory a repertory might have been self-defeating; and it is not easy to think of any truly 'progressive' composers of English church music on whom he might have drawn in his heyday. Other matters are, so to speak, the faults of his qualities, and are therefore inherent in the condition of the very existence of the School. Vision he certainly had in some respects. But, paradoxical though it may seem in the light of what he accomplished, he was not also, one feels, a man of broad imagination. Some reformers seek to replace one thing by another; he belonged to the larger class of those who attempt to improve what they find, which in his case was also something peculiarly congenial to his temperament.

When, after having allowed for more than half a century of rapid, far-reaching changes in opinions of many kinds, the fullest weight is given to these considerations, we are still left with a record of impressive achievement, even though altered conditions may have whittled some of it away. Nicholson's hand found what he had to do; and he proceeded to do it with his might.

## THE NICHOLSON-OLIVIER-VALE RELATIONSHIPS



### III

## THE SCHOOL OF ENGLISH CHURCH MUSIC AT WORK, 1929-1939

¶ When organising the material relating to these years it is convenient to treat the College of St Nicolas separately (see Section IV). In the present section the College will be referred to only when its premises are used for short courses and other events outside its regular routine but part of the wider work of the School.

The first outward witness of any significance relating to the scheme for affiliation of choirs took place in May 1929 when, at the institution of the Revd G. H. Salter (who had previously been the first chaplain of the College of St Nicolas) as vicar of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Holborn, a choir of some 400 singers was assembled from the affiliated choirs of the London area. By St Nicolas-tide at the end of that year a festival celebration was held in the same church by a choir of similar size representative of ten dioceses.<sup>1</sup> By that time the number of affiliated choirs all told amounted to about 300. However, as already hinted, it was evident that a good deal of doubt existed among parishes about the value, or indeed the purpose of affiliation. The meagre *Quarterly News Sheet* and the facility of attendance (at a fee) at the College did not constitute strong inducements, especially outside London. The apparent failure of this side of the scheme to catch fire at first was reflected at an early conference of 12 diocesan representatives in July 1929, when it was reported that the affiliated choirs felt isolated. To remedy this a 'Guild of St Nicolas' was formed, without subscription, 'to weld them all into one body', and a short Guild Office was drawn up. But surely, one considers, it should have been simply by an affiliation to the SECM that isolation ought to have been overcome; and it is significant that when the organisation grows and activities multiply this Guild fades away. In that same summer the work of the School was carried beyond Chislehurst by a tour of the St Nicolas choristers (*alias* the 16th Bromley Troop of Boy Scouts) in the dioceses of Bristol and Salisbury, singing services in various churches while the warden explained the objects and ideals of the School. Similar tours were organised in other areas in subsequent years.

<sup>1</sup> For some years this was an annual event. *MT*, 1932, 57, reporting on that for 1931, noted that 'the body of the church was packed with men and boys, and *women members of the choirs were seated in the aisles* (present author's italics)

Notwithstanding his own buoyancy of spirits and unfaltering belief in what he was doing, Nicholson could not conceal disappointment when he reported to his Council in October 1929. The appeal for funds was not going well, and, still pinning his hopes mainly (perhaps too much) on the College, he found there were not enough applications for full time places in it. It was in a state of some depression that, early in 1930, he answered the telephone to find the editor of the *Daily Mail* speaking. The paper, he said, had been following the progress of the SECM and would like to do something to help. The result of this astonishing approach was a Festival of Church Music on 27 July 1930 in the Royal Albert Hall, London, entirely financed by the *Daily Mail*, which also paid the travelling and subsistence expenses of some 1,200 singers from 180 affiliated choirs, four from Scotland, two from Ireland.

Here indeed was publicity on a magnificent scale, heightened in the actual event by 'wireless', as radio broadcasting was then called. Nicholson determined to stamp the affair with his ideals for the School. That is to say it was not to be just a grand recital of church music by a huge choir but have the character of a liturgical service undertaken in 'the spirit of worship and not of mere performance' as he puts it in the preface to the music book. And it was not window-dressing. He aimed by this means to demonstrate what he would stress on a visit to some individual choir, however small and remote. The music chosen was intended to be a repertory, not of difficult, spectacular pieces, but of what choirs could sing in their own churches throughout the year (see *Quarterly News Sheet*, April 1930), differing in this respect from the existing type of diocesan choral festivals. He particularly took trouble to provide guidance in advance about chanting the responses and psalms, and as a practical help for the benefit of participating choirs a Columbia gramophone record was produced of the psalms to be sung at the festival. Long before leaving Westminster Abbey he had interested himself experimentally in the application of 'speech rhythm' (as had been more elaborately proposed by Robert Bridges) to psalm-singing to anglican chants, and his work was to bear its full fruit in *The Parish Psalter*, published early in 1932.<sup>2</sup> But now for the first time his ideas were publicly demonstrated in a large way. He would have been pleased that in reporting the festival *MT*, 1930, 732, commented particularly and at some length on this feature. Furthermore, he tried to be as comprehensive as possible in choice of music, and included a little plainsong.

<sup>2</sup> Some years later Nicholson generously made over all his rights in this publication to the SECM, a significant source of income for it.