

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

DORA GREENWELL.

A MEMORIAL SKETCH.

PART I.

Per te poeta fui, per te cristiano.—*Dante.*

IF any one were called upon to say what most upheld his trust in the Divine government of the world, he would point to some man or woman he had known. "There, he would say, was one whose ways and words had a meaning beyond what he himself knew or aimed at. The equipoise of his belief and conduct forever stamped on my mind a sense of the nearness, the reality, and power of God in the soul. In knowing this man I knew *goodness*, saw its serene eye, felt its very touch. His whole character, that mysterious *summum bonum*, so complex, yet so clear, witnessed to something beyond himself. He seemed more than his own qualities combined. He bore about with him the looks and tones of another and better country, and, as the plenipotentiary of a Greater Power, seemed to draw others into allegiance to it."

The memory of my friend Dora Greenwell must remain this to me. With no intention of writing a sketch of her life, I inscribe her name at the head of this page. There exists a sympathetic biography written by the Rev. W. Dorling, which gives to those who desire them, particulars of her career. Much as to her youth and early associations, of which she talked to me with the frankness of friend to friend, I have no desire to narrate. She had a strong sense of the sacred quiet which should close over every grave, unless the strongest reasons to the contrary should exist; and she expressed the belief that, for many reasons, her own life was best left unwritten. I wish to present her to others as she was to me, giving only such details of her life as will serve to show her character. If I can make

any one feel, in some degree, the charm of her nature, or lead any who have not read her poems and essays to do so, I shall have done what I desire.

The reserve which made her deprecate any proposal of writing her life, did not affect her sense of the value which her works must have to many. "I have," she said to me, "written some things which I hope will be read, and which must help some. I know that no one else has said what I have said, because these things have come out of my own soul. They are valid; they are warm with the warmth of my own life."

My knowledge of Dora Greenwell began shortly after my return from a long visit to America. It had been my good fortune to meet what is most delightful in American society, to which women lend so great a charm. I had in my mind several brilliant and most lovable American women, as I met Miss Greenwell; but they were recalled by contrast.

She seemed, at first sight, an embodiment of purely English life and ways of thinking. She was an English gentlewoman before the type had been touched for better and worse by the higher education of women. Born in a beautiful ancestral home; bred under the shadow of a cathedral, allied to its services by blood and association, what she had gained from the atmosphere of learning and scholarship always surrounding her did not come through lessons and lectures, or any of the stimulants which are offered to girls nowadays, but had been won by her ardent mind fastening on all knowledge within reach with passionate eagerness, and by the companionship of two very gifted brothers. There was force and flavour in her talk; though still bearing about her the subtle and delicate charm of what is best in conventional bearing, she seemed to have a free, even daring mind. The antique setting of her

character seemed to enhance its brilliance and variety. In five minutes you were at home with her. There were no barriers, no preliminaries to be gone through. Very soon you began to perceive that it was not so much the grace of a woman of the world which procured your ease, as that transparent simplicity which seems to be the joint gift of genius and childhood. The restrictions I speak of were shown in an avoidance of some subjects which, from the effect perhaps of wider knowledge, have lately pushed their way into the interests of some very excellent people; an almost nervous dislike of slang phraseology and exaggerations of speech, and a certain severity in discountenancing evil-doing. Once, when staying at a friend's house in the country, she took curious means to avoid meeting a great lady suddenly announced,—one whose wrong-doing had been condoned by the world—as Miss Greenwell thought—because of her wealth and position. In spite of the remonstrances of her good-natured host (who perhaps enjoyed the curious conjunction of things), Dora maintained her point. She would *not* meet Lady ——; and, no other retreat offering, she went into a butler's pantry, which opened off the room where they then were, and there sat among the knives and trays till the visit was over. “I will confess, dear,” she said to me in telling the story, “that I *did* peep through the crack of the door, and,”—with a voice softening to great feeling,—“she was a beautiful creature, poor thing!” I could multiply instances still more striking of old-world austerity towards fashionable laxities and shortcomings which sometimes cost more courageous action than merely going into a cupboard. All this was in contrast to her compassionate outgoings towards many whom the world is very ready to punish and avoid; what she often said and did to such, would be likely to startle even those inclined to be what is called “liberal.” Very gentle in manner as she was, I remember an occasion

when she showed uncompromising severity in sweeping aside a discussion of what she thought lay outside decent human interest. She believed it would often be found that the feeling of the working classes, in spite of rougher candour of speech, was more wholesome and reverential towards the mysteries of life than that prevalent among a class of the much better educated.

Akin to her reverence for purity of manners, was her sense of the beauty of language as language, and her dislike of slipshod talk and affectations of speech. Speaking of the indignities and familiarities of what is called "colloquial writing," she once said, "Be simple, but not colloquial. It greatly offends me to meet with contractions such as 'don't' and 'can't' in a book. Every book is and must be a book, and ought not to pretend to come walking up and free and easy, holding you by the button."

My friendship with Dora Greenwell began in 1869, and lasted till her death in 1882. Our first meeting was when she came to call on my mother at Beckenham. We all remembered well the talk of that long summer's afternoon,—for her visit lengthened on till twilight,—and we seemed to part with an old friend, when, at last, we accompanied her and my brother-in-law, who had brought her down to see us, to the gate. Her tall figure wrapt in an Indian shawl worn with a point behind, had, I know not what, air of peculiar old-fashioned grace. We understood the meaning of the look which James Macdonell threw back at us as, with her leaning on his arm, he walked down the road. He was a young man then, she some twenty years older than he. Then, and to the end of his life, he felt for her the most tender and admiring devotion, a devotion shared in by his wife when he married, and which was echoed in the pathetic poem, *The Threefold Chord*, written by Dora Greenwell on his death.

This visit happened during one of her sojourns in London,

but while her home was still with her mother at Durham. Our intercourse during the years that followed went on by means of interchanging visits, and pretty constant meetings when, later on, she settled in London. London habits never cooled her north country warmth in welcoming a guest, and the entire elasticity of her domestic arrangements seemed to make meals come, when they were wanted, and not otherwise. She was often ill—I must, alas! many times refer to the physical weight which frequently bore her down, but in intercourse this was never apparent. Her mood was ever eager, tender, *glowing*; her mind responding to every touch from outside.

During her first visit at Beckenham there was much talk of American matters. She had many readers and friends in America, and had followed the course of the civil war and showed a knowledge of the contest very unusual in “polite” England of that day. Her sympathy was on the side of the North, the success of which, as she rightly had divined from the first, was involved in the abolition of slavery. I remember how after breakfast, till late in the morning, or during the long summer twilights, the talk flowed on on many subjects, her part in it,—always a large one,—exercising a charm over all. Her voice was low and pleasant. She had a little hesitation in speaking which did not fret or obscure the sense, and could not be called a stammer. It seemed more like a tremulous earnestness, and, coming as it often did, before some word of happy fitness, gave a certain sense of discrimination and care to the phrase, as when, speaking of the gifts of a certain dignitary of the Church, whose great position, learning and scholarship left little room perhaps for humility, she added, “But to be with him—is—is a *solvent* to faith.”

Whatever it might begin with, the talk was likely to drift towards the region of what may be termed Christian metaphysics, which was always “the ocean to the river of

her thoughts." But there were a thousand springs to start from, and the course might be long. Her talk was not a "calculable quantity." It was difficult to predict more of it than that it was sure to cover much ground, flowing like a river "at its own sweet will," rounding and doubling on its way, pausing and subsiding as it were into quiet contemplative pools, and then starting afresh with new energy in another direction. It was always to be noted, however, that though her wandering and digressing might be far as the south pole, she would never fail to return tranquilly to the main course. Sometimes, in illustration, she would narrate a family history, anecdotes of her youth, tales of Durham miners; these would be full of minute, often vivid, descriptions of persons among those she had known, both gentle and simple. There were touches of humour in these stories, as there must be in the narratives of any thoughtful person speaking of their species, but they usually bore on the ideal, often on the tragic side of life, never on the merely trivial, which is the vulgar. The merely trivial in life neither fretted nor pleased her; it did not indeed exist to her. Only the simple permanent interests of life, the joys and sorrows interwoven with a thousand threads with marriage, birth, and death, which to her mind veiled, but only veiled, the sacramental meaning behind, touched her. She would often seize on a poem, or a sentence in a book she was reading, and it would serve as a pivot for the talk of a whole afternoon to turn on, and her frequent phrase, "I have been thinking, dear, of what Hooker—or Goethe—or Vaughan—or Victor Hugo says" (it was impossible to say whence the inspiration would come), would usher in a discourse very like a chapter from the *Two Friends* or *Colloquia Crucis*, as she saw the subject expand, and, in the great order of spiritual life, lay hold of other truths. Things from outside often also served the purpose. Living alone, her work and thoughts keeping her much

among abstract things, she seemed to feel more quickly than most people the sweetness and power of the world of beauty and feeling; a flower, an incident told of human goodness, patience or heroism, a sensible or high-minded political speech, all roused and interested her. Towards all that belonged to the moral life and government of the world every fibre of her being responded. Her artistic instinct was strong; beauty in literature, in art, and music kindled her, but it was in the moral and spiritual world of God's kingdom in which her heart lived, and desired to live. Speaking to me once of the depths of delight stirred within her by a Velasquez of great grandeur which we were looking at at Leigh Court, she added, "But I hope I could see it *burned* without a pang if its preservation involved a moral wrong—a wrong which could be set right by its destruction." This must sound as vandalism to many ears. But perhaps it may be doubted whether any true art ever grew till there was in the hearts of men some love of things beyond it such as this.

She had the (unconscious) logician's love of clear language, the true gestures of the mind, and the delicacies and subtleness of fine translation were pleasant to her. She loved Latin; the very sound gave her pleasure. She gave to very many of her poems Latin names, and they do not seem pedantic. Something in the sound of that tongue, the language of law and religion and learning, strong in itself and full of the echoes of greatness, is not unfriendly to the solemn and mystic subjects of all her poems.

She liked to see new books, and was a generous critic, generally able to lay her finger upon the excellencies of any book which possessed worth at all. But she by no means loved everything. Speaking one day of an imaginative work of a young author belonging to a certain school which one is inclined to think hides much barrenness

under a wordy enthusiasm for the lawless and unsavoury—a sort of *amateur* Satanic school—she said, “But it is not worth picking out of the gutter, dear.”

It was when the talk moved into higher planes that she was at her best. Her mind then seemed to put on new energy, and some of her phrases would be clear and sharp, nailing an idea unforgetably into the mind. When the subject lifted and warmed her, bright and excellent things came. They were spoken with a tremulous eagerness and hesitation, as if she herself were awed by what she saw revealed of sacred truth. The habit of italicising certain sentences in her writings recalls her manner of speaking. Her talk was as far removed from trick or affectation as it was from method. Cheap aphorisms, neat paradoxes, were not in her way. She was too serious, too self-forgetful for such clevernesses. She had nothing in common with the professional talker, nothing in her manner showed expectancy of triumph, or desire even to be heard. But in a group of two or three, with a subject of real interest, it was curious to see how what *she* said gradually gave colour to the whole.

It was best to be alone with her. She had for a time a little house in Westminster, beyond the Poets' Corner, looking unto the buttresses of the Abbey and the green-sward of the cloisters. I used to go there at any odd hours of the day I could spare, or when a line of summons came from her. How many hours of unpremeditated happiness shone there! Sometimes when I arrived she had not left her bedroom (her health was then very frail), and then was dressing. With the door open between us, we would converse till she appeared, always fully dressed, and with charming neatness and completeness in every particular. She would lie down on the couch with its back towards one window, and set me in a low chair near her. The little white tablet which hung on the window shutter and on which she

jotted down her thoughts, subjects for conversation, questions of household economy,—a quaint jumble!—was sometimes consulted, and some of its contents discussed. If it happened to be a difficulty or worry, it was settled quickly, often made the subject of fun. “If one may not laugh over one’s misfortunes,” she said, “one would be often badly off for a joke in this world.” Greater misfortunes never absorbed place in her talk either. In conversation or writing she never dwelt on the altered fortunes which had thrown her and her family out of the beautiful home in which the Greenwells had lived without a break since the fifteenth century. Only once do I remember her referring to it, and then it was in telling of the extreme gentleness and goodness of her father under misfortune, and the devoted love with which he was regarded by rich and poor.

In this dignity of bearing Dora Greenwell resembled her mother, who was a remarkable person in many ways. Miss Ingelow describes her as having “an almost Roman air of decision and energy.” Mrs. Greenwell died shortly after I became acquainted with her daughter, and I never saw more than her likeness, and a photograph taken after death. This might have been from some piece of classic sculpture, so rare was the mixture of beauty and repose on the strong features. Of her mother she often talked. The relationship between them was on one side authoritative and affectionate, and on the other always tender and considerate, and in the later years, when Mrs. Greenwell was broken in spirit and body by illness, self-forgetfully devoted. Mrs. Greenwell was of the old high and dry school of the Church of England, and would never have yielded an inch to the arguments of either Papist or Dissenter. She showed this on one occasion which Dora described to me. An impoverished Roman Catholic gentleman used to make the rounds among the gentry of Durham and the neighbouring counties, selling, in a quiet way, lace and haberdashery.

At Greenwell Ford he was always received with kindness and hospitality. His pack was lightened of its wares, and he was welcomed as a guest. On one of these occasions, at lunch, he was telling a story of the cruel disabilities and wrongs under which Romanists had suffered. Mrs. Greenwell expressed warm sympathy with the sufferings of the victim of oppression he had described, "But," she said, striking her hand emphatically on the table, "remember, Mr. —, if I had the power, I would put those laws into force again."

When sickness fell with a heavy hand on this proud woman, it brought one of those strange moral changes which occur in some diseases. The strong affection she had always felt for her daughter now found outward expression as it had not done before. When, after a period of unconsciousness, she began gradually to regain her powers, she seemed to have changed her nature. She was caressing and playful. Miss Greenwell described the overflowing of her heart with joy as one day, as she knelt by the bedside, her mother, using her still active hand to raise her paralysed arm, wound it about her daughter's neck with a little laugh of tenderness and pleasure. For a brief space this new spirit lasted, pouring a sort of exquisite sunshine into the gloom of sickness. Then, as the invalid regained her powers, this playful tenderness faded away, and she became once more her old self. But by her daughter the memory of this time was cherished always as a glimpse into the inner shrine of her mother's nature, a hope for the future life.

During her last illness Mrs. Greenwell craved spiritual aid, and not such as she had always had within her reach in the Church, and in the tender ministrations of her daughter. A young scripture reader—not a highly gifted person—was her chosen minister. Dora used to sit by, listening to the well-meaning commonplaces of the mis-

sionary, and praying out of the passionate abundance of her own heart for both him and her mother. "It might seem strange to me that she should find anything in it. But God chooses his own instruments," she said with all the meekness of true affection.

One thing more, while speaking of this strong and upright woman. It was surely an inheritance of her unbending virtue which gave Dora her unusual severity and high feeling with regard to money, that subtle test of character, representative of the value of all things mundane! About money matters she was scrupulous and sensitive. She had the generosity which is never careless of other people's small expenses, rigorously mindful of her own. This, in one lavish by nature, and indifferent as St. Paul himself to money as money, is worth recording.

For three months in 1879 she took rooms near us at Denmark Hill, and we met daily and at all hours. For an hour or two every afternoon I would sit by her as she lay on her couch by the fire, her servant reading, or at work in the large bow-window. Sometimes she came to me, but that was rarely. She liked to see my little girls playing among the daisies on the lawn, or dancing to the airs of an organ, which was invited into the garden for their amusement once a week, and her eyes filled with soft benediction as she looked at them. But she was then too weak to bear the noise and vivacity of young life, except to contemplate it, and the times we were together were usually in her sunny sitting-room. Often, too, when my husband was detained late at the Temple or the *Times* office, and when my children were asleep, I went and sat with her till midnight—for she never slept till towards morning, and was glad to talk out the somewhat weary early hours of the night. Some of my happiest memories of her are of this time. Often as I went home—it was but a moment's walk from her house to the little door in our garden wall, which

was left open for me—I used to feel, late as it was, and often the end of a busy day, an inward refreshment and lifting of heart, which made the starlit heavens seem more familiar and near.

The people of the house where she lodged were Germans—quiet and gentle people. While she was there, a child was born to them, the first after ten years of marriage. It only lived a few hours, and in the night, hearing it was dying, and the parents in deep distress, Miss Greenwell went upstairs and sat by the poor mother, and to her infinite consolation, taking the new-born child in her arms, she administered the rite of baptism. The sacrament was, to her, the seal of divine recognition of the mystery of birth, placing once more in the protecting arms of God the marvellous gift of His love.

AGNES MACDONELL.

ON SOME POINTS IN PROFESSOR ROBERTSON
SMITH'S LECTURES ON THE OLD
TESTAMENT.

DR. DRIVER'S forthcoming review of the second edition of Prof. Robertson Smith's well-known work will doubtless make it superfluous for me to show by details the exceeding merit of the book. Strictly speaking, indeed, it is above both eulogy and criticism, in so far as it reproduces those admirable lectures which to so many, even of those who now sit in the professor's chair, have been delightful companions. Yes; not only the higher criticism of the Bible, but this excellent introduction to the study, has proved its life, "like Dante among the shades," by moving what it touches. It is however worth while for some of us to confer with the author, as with an old friend, on some of the new pages of his book.' I shall not speak of the important additional matter in Lectures V. and XI., nor of the new concluding lecture, and only incidentally of the re-written seventh Lecture which has to do with the Book of Psalms. Two of the six appended notes will