WILLIAM BRIGHT.

DR. WILLIAM BRIGHT, for thirty-one years Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Oxford, who closed his career peacefully on March 6, at the age of 76, was probably less well known, even in the world of scholars, than his conspicuous gifts and merits deserved. They deserved a reputation that should not be less than European, or rather Ecumenical: in the circles in which he was known he was deeply beloved and revered ; but it may be doubted whether these circles extended far beyond the clergy of the Anglican communion. The laity, it is probable, knew him chiefly through his influence on the clergy.

With these he was brought in several ways into close and impressive contact. His lectures were attended by candidates for holy orders—English, and also to some extent American. In spite of some little drawbacks of delivery, the best of them richly felt and appreciated his power ; with some he remained an intimate and delightful friend for life. Others of the clergy he met at the courses of lectures for the working clergy given from time to time in the summer. And here, too, he found enthusiastic listeners. Lastly, in Convocation, the Parliament (unhappily without the powers of Parliament) of the English Church, he held a unique position, as at once a brilliant speaker, an exact thinker, and probably the most learned man in the whole assembly, at least in the Lower House. In this capacity I have reason to know how highly he was valued ; because here, as elsewhere, admiration for his gifts went along—as it could not but go along—with personal affection for the man.

When we look outside in the wider world, Dr. Bright was known, as I have implied, in the Episcopal Churches of America, and still more nearly and dearly in the Episcopal Church of Scotland—from 1851 to 1858 he was Tutor and Professor of

Ecclesiastical History at Trinity College, Glenalmond. Besides this, his fame had doubtless spread to the cultured Roman Catholic scholars of France, who have a certain leaning towards the best of our Anglican workers in the same field. I do not think that he read much German; and partly as a consequence of this, I do not think that he was much known in Germany, except perhaps thro gh a few striking articles in the *Dictionary of Christian Biography* (Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, Dioscorus, and Theophilus of Alexandria) and through his *Early English Church History*.

This somewhat restricted reputation, so much within his real merits, was due, I suppose, partly to this want of inter-communion with the great school of Germany (where, however, I do not doubt that a scholar like Döllinger would have been familiar with his writings); in part to his passionate love for the Church of his own land; but most of all to his naturally shy and retiring habit, and to a deep-seated Christian humility. It was a consequence of these combined qualities that, although he wrote much, it was for the most part on a scale or on occasions of secondary rather than first-rate importance.

So far only two courses of professorial or quasi-professorial lectures have seen the light. *A History of the Church from* A. D. 313–451 (1860) was the fruit of his studies at Glenalmond; *Chapters of Early English Church History* (1878, third edition, 1897) embodied the substance of lectures delivered at Oxford. *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius* (1872); *Orations of St. Athanasius against the Arians* (1873); *The Ecclesiastical History of Socrates* (1878); *Select Anti-Pelagian Treatises of St. Augustine* (1880); *Historical Writings of St. Athanasius* (1881); were all reprints for educational purposes of older texts, but with elaborate introductions, into which the historian and theologian really threw his strength. The Notes on *The Canons of the First Four General Councils* (1882) had a similar origin, and are characteristic of the writer's learning. *Lessons from the Lives of Three Great Fathers* (1890); *Waymarks in Church History* (1894); *The Roman See in the Early Church* (1896); *Some Aspects of Primitive Church Life* (1898); are either lectures delivered to the clergy or reprints of articles. These last-named works, though in one sense slight, really bear the marks of the master's hand, as I

shall indicate presently. I rejoice to think, however, that materials are left for a volume or, I believe, two volumes of continuous lectures in a condition to go to press. These were written in the very maturity of the author's powers, and should do him the full justice that his friends desire.

Dr. Bright was a born historian; but a historian rather perhaps in the older sense of narrative and descriptive history than in the full modern style. He had very nearly all the gifts of a great historian, with just that limitation.

To begin with, he had complete command of his materials. The patristic texts were at his fingers' ends. He had a retentive and comprehensive memory, which summoned up the illustrations that he needed at his bidding. He did not need to trust to the references of others, but poured them out in profusion from his own reading, as his copious annotations show.

He was a thoroughly good scholar, trained at Rugby under Arnold and Tait; and he handled all the mass of materials of which we have been speaking with a scholar's sureness. Of course I do not mean that differences of interpretation are not possible; but at least these differences will not (as they sometimes do with eminent historians) turn upon imperfect knowledge of Greek.

Then he had, in very conspicuous degree, the historical imagination. And it was imagination that never flagged. He saw the scene vividly before his own mind, and presented it as vividly to his hearers or readers. He did not deal much in abstractions; but the men of whom he speaks are essentially creatures of flesh and blood.

For this is a further point, that he had an intense human interest, not without the salt of humour. He entered to the full into all the human aspects of his narrative. It was no dead chronicle, but a living drama.

And the interest was not only intensely human but intensely religious. He saw not only the humour and the pathos, but still more the grandeur and sublimity, more especially in the whole-hearted champions of the faith. He entered alike into their deepest struggles and into their loftiest aspirations. He knew by heart numbers of their prayers; and has left behind more

than one collection of prayers for private use based upon the ancient collects.

He was not only a historian but primarily a Church historian; and not only a Church historian, but a great theologian. I have said that he knew the Fathers through and through; and he knew them not only from the point of view of history, but from that of doctrine. He was entirely at home in all the dogmatic controversies of the early centuries. He could handle these also with absolute precision. There was no greater authority in this country—I doubt if there were many greater authorities in any country—as to the authentic content of Catholic teaching. On such points Dr. Bright was always ready to take up his pen. He was a controversialist of a kind that is good for a Church, because he did not spend his strength in vague beating of the air, but he had definite standards before his mind, and it was a mind that could appreciate fine distinctions.

It will be seen how the presence of some of these qualities served as a corrective against the dangers that might possibly have been incidental to others. For instance, the strength of the human interest, and still more the strength of the religious interest, saved the theologian from falling a victim to the hardness of dogma. To my thinking the little volume of *Lessons from the Lives of Three Great Fathers* (1890) is a perfect model of its kind. The Fathers in question are St. Athanasius, St. Chrysostom and St. Augustine; and occasion is taken to state clearly the principles for which these Fathers contended, and to bring out the erroneous tendencies which they opposed. The main part of the book consists of three Advent addresses delivered in Christ Church Cathedral; so that it was necessarily pitched in a key that brought home its subject to the minds and hearts of plain Christian people. And at the same time it was enriched by a series of Appendices that could only have been written by an accomplished theologian. I am not sure that this is not really an ideal combination. The professed dogmatician can hardly escape being hard, formal and technical: and these qualities are just what repel so many minds. But Dr. Bright's modest volume combines the precision of profound knowledge with the equally profound note of simple piety. Only a great man could have written such a book; which is really very

different from what are often described as 'popular sketches.' And this is one of the compensations for that self-restraint which, as I have said,

'The lowliest duties on itself did lay.'

In another sense the other little volume, *Some Aspects of Primitive Church Life*, is an example of the same thing. This also is made up only of summer lectures, but they are such lectures as no one but Dr. Bright could give. The 'aspects' all stand out as vividly as if they were painted on canvas. I should like to quote freely from, but I will content myself by referring the reader to, more especially, the Fourth Address on the relations of the early Christians to the heathen, and on the persecutions.

I might quote this address as a good example of the characteristics of Dr. Bright's style.

He was an excellent writer of English. His style had a wide range, and was capable of very varied tones. It was remarkable for its flexibility. Like Newman, though perhaps not quite with that supreme delicacy of finish, he could use simple idiomatic and even colloquial expressions with great effect. But his style rose naturally with his subject. He was a true poet; and when the occasion required it, the right word, the imaginative word, with just the fitting dash of colour or of passion, seemed to be always forthcoming. And there was never anything really strained; the colour or the passion was never overdone. It was true eloquence, and not rhetoric. What it left behind was not the sense of effort but of mastery.

One of the reasons for this excellence was that his memory was stored with recollections of the English classics. We have been reminded (in the *Times* and *Guardian*) that his favourite reading was Scott, Miss Austen, and Dickens; much of their writings he knew almost by heart. And for the forming of a style there is no school like that of conversation, and the study of writers who are good in conversation. It is just this that gives the kind of ease and flexibility of which I have been speaking.

Perhaps it might be a criticism of Dr. Bright's published works that reminiscences of phrase came almost too easily. The

page is sometimes sprinkled almost too freely with inverted commas. But when he spoke this was not noticeable.

I used to think Dr. Bright at his very best in preaching, especially in the later years in which I heard him most frequently. His preaching had all the chastened spontaneity of his writing. Mere accomplishments of style would have counted for nothing, if the moving ideas and interests had not been great and noble. And that in his case they emphatically were. He had some drawbacks, as I have already said, in the matter of delivery. He had had to get over a slight impediment, one consequence of which was that the words sometimes seemed to be pent up and come with a rush, so that the end of a sentence, including its most telling part, was too often lost to the hearer. His action also, though free and unconstrained, was apt to be somewhat ungainly. But there was a fervour and earnestness in his utterance that was very impressive. He spoke as a true 'ambassador of Christ' with a burning desire to win souls; and yet one thought only of the message and not of the man. He seemed, as he spoke, to have before him a vision of the world unseen, which awed and subdued his language, though it did not quench the fire within.

What, it may be asked, is missing from this enumeration of striking qualities? Why did I say that Dr. Bright was a historian of an older school than that which is now in vogue? He had wider and more genuine first-hand knowledge than many members of that school; but there were some things for which he did not care.

He did not care much about texts or MSS. I am not sure that this greatly mattered with his pictorial mode of treatment, and for the period in which he was most at home. The effect given by the writers of the fourth and fifth centuries does not turn upon a phrase. And their precise distinctions in the use of words are not often affected by a question of reading. It is in the earlier tentative periods, and where we have to explore our way very much in the dark, that readings sometimes become of great importance, and sometimes light up the story of a long development. On such ground as this Dr. Bright was not seen to the same advantage.

He also did not care much for the criticism of sources. I could not quite say that he learnt his trade before the criticism of sources came in—for Prof. Freeman (who, by the by, always spoke of him with admiration) would be an example to the contrary. Where anything was to be learnt in English or French about the criticism of sources, he paid attention to it; but it was not natural to him to approach his subject in this way. It was natural to him to take his texts without much analysis, as they came to his hand.

Neither was he exactly what would be called a philosophical historian. His interest in the niceties of doctrine was of a different kind. What he saw most clearly was men, not movements. The subtle discrimination of forces at work, with their swaying fortunes, their rise and fall, was not to his mind. Hence it was that Prof. Gwatkin's *Studies in Arianism* was a real advance on Dr. Bright's earlier book; as it also was in its very careful examination of the chronology.

Again, there was just one qualification to that human interest of which I have had occasion to say so much—a qualification which I think was considerably less marked in his later than in his earlier years. For Dr. Bright a saint was a saint, and a heretic was a heretic. Perhaps he took the invectives of the Church Fathers a little too much *au pied de la lettre.* To some of us these invectives, which were not inspired wholly, though of course they were inspired ultimately, by the issues at stake, are a stone of stumbling. As time went on Dr. Bright came to see that there was more to be said for the poor men than perhaps appeared at first sight, that they were often contending for truth, though not quite in the proportions of truth, and that they were not always, as men, so black as they were painted.

The published works are not in every case the complete artistic success that the combination of so many artistic gifts would seem to promise. In a characteristic and delightful sketch contributed by Canon Scott Holland to the *Church Times* there is one sentence that seems to me to hit the mark:

'All his best gifts were in richest use as he lectured. The names and allusions which sometimes overlay, by their multitude, the broad effect of his books, were swept along into the main current by the energy of his dramatic force as he spoke.'

There is a hint here of a defect of which I imagine that we are most conscious in what is in some ways (as yet) his most considerable effort, the *Chapters of Early English Church History*. We desiderate a little more *breadth* of treatment. For the ordinary purposes of narrative Dr. Bright's selection of points is very good. But the landmarks are not quite boldly enough indicated. We sometimes (especially, I think, in this particular book) cannot see the wood for the trees. I do not doubt that, as Canon Scott Holland assures us, this drawback quite disappeared in the dramatic interest of the spoken lecture. I should also not be surprised if the posthumous work for which we are to look was found to be completely free from it. In that case the freedom would be due to the maturity that comes from long handling and mastery of knowledge.

I hope I have made it clear that England, and Oxford in particular, have suffered a great loss. They have lost one who had, no doubt, his own idiosyncrasy, but who continued worthily and on the highest level the distinguished line of the scholars of the past. And they have also lost one who by personal gifts and charm and depth of character was a force at once inspiring and refreshing in the present. To live near Dr. Bright was like dwelling by the side of a perennial spring in a thirsty land.

W. SANDAY.