

Dr. Whitley, whose magnificent services to the Baptist Historical Society and the Baptist Quarterly place all Baptists under a great obligation, will be away in America during the greater part of 1928. During his absence temporary assistance on the antiquarian side of the Quarterly will be given by a member of the Society who has generously come to our help. In Dr. Whitley's absence correspondence and articles may be addressed to Dr. F. Townley Lord, Coventry.

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## John Bunyan.

NO one thinks of Bunyan without thinking of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and in some measure it is true that the man has been lost in his book. There is now the possibility that he will be more densely obscured in the avalanche of Tercentenary books, sermons, orations, and reviews which will descend upon his memory. Those of us who have been forward to contribute our ounce to this avalanche may already have our qualms of conscience, but certainly Mr. Coats may except himself: for he has given us a study of the Bedford brazier<sup>1</sup> which no instructed Bunyan-lover can afford to neglect. Mr. Coats is not concerned to give us an elaborate Life. In the first chapter he presents us with a biographical summary; thereafter he addresses himself to his main task, which is a study of Bunyan in the various phases of his activity—as Wrestler with God, Pastor and Preacher, Dreamer of Dreams, and Writer of Books. This is in the manner of Hale White's monograph, but Mr. Coats' is a fuller and more understanding book. White's study, for all its literary quality and chaste sincerity, is limp and bloodless. The author of *Mark Rutherford*, like Bunyan himself, was a religious sensitive, and an artist in English, but he had no clue to the Puritan experience, or at least—to adopt the jargon of to-day—he had a complex which chafed him in his approach to it: so that when he wrote of Bunyan it was with the tired and wistful admiration of a dispirited man. And indeed it is curious that the

<sup>1</sup> John Bunyan: R. H. Coats, M.A.: 126 pp. ~ S.C.M. 2s. 6d.

Bedford Puritan should have attracted so many writers who were out of touch with his central experience. Thus both Macaulay and Froude contributed their essays in Bunyan biography, each of them excellent in its way, but neither of them achieving any intimacy of contact with its subject. Mr. Coats has no such impediment; he knows the way of Bunyan's soul and writes with gravity and sincerity, and (if it may be said without presumption), with a power of analysis and critical appreciation which leaves us permanently enriched.

## I

With his eye chiefly upon the student class, who have Dr. Brown's massive biography for their main facts, he is frugal, as has been said, in his narrative section. But so much romance has been written around Bunyan's parentage and early life that one is tempted to linger over this portion. Perhaps Mr. Coats is right when he protests that "the word 'tinker' ought to be excluded from a book on Bunyan,"—though it is safe to say that it never will be. When Carey's disparagers would ask him if he had not been a shoemaker, it was his way to reply: "No; a cobbler." Much in the same spirit Bunyan preferred to pass as a tinker rather than as a brazier. But probably it is true, also, that in both cases the inferior term was strictly correct. When Mr. Coats, following Charles Doe, tells us that Thomas Bonniomn "earned a precarious livelihood by mending pots and kettles," and when we recollect that John himself (with "several of his brothers," as Doe would have us believe,) did journeyman-jobbing in this line through the countryside, we know by the same token that "tinker" is not very wide of the mark. John's son, however, called himself a brazier and so did father Thomas.

One would like to know more, by the way, of this father Thomas. Those who argue for a Romany strain and would present us with a seventeenth century "Gipsy Bunyan" (to couple with our twentieth century Gipsy Smith) must accept our regrets. It would be pleasant to believe it, but the facts are not pliable. Our Anglo-Israel friends may be more interested in John's own fugitive notion that he might be of Hebrew stock:—A "thought came into my mind; and that was, whether we were of the *Israelites*, or no? . . . At last I asked my father of it; who told me—'No, we were not.'" Certainly there was nothing in his physique or colouring to suggest an oriental strain; as we know, he was tall and strong-boned, with reddish hair and florid complexion.

The fact is that the Bunyans, Bonniomns, Beynyns or Buignons had belonged to the yeomanry of Bedfordshire for

centuries. In the parish of Chalgrave alone, and between the years 1539 and 1628, there were "no fewer than fifty-five baptisms, twelve marriages and twenty-two burials of that name" (See memoir: Elstow edition *Pilgrim's Progress*, 1881.). Incidentally, a John Bunyan was christened in Chalgrave two years before his Elstow namesake. No doubt it is high time that some ingenious Celt should come forward with the claim that "Bunyan" is simply a variant of Benyon or Ap Eynon. But *Buignon* holds the field and points us back to the Norman Conquest.

As for father Thomas, George Dawson in his *Biographical Sketches* (1886.) sees him as a "just, severe, Bible-reading, much-praying man, a thorough-paced Puritan"; George Offor sees him as a graceless wretch. Probably he was neither. Doe, who knew Bunyan personally, sets it down that Thomas was of "the national religion," and his last will and testament, quoted in *Dr. Brown's Life*, suggests the same. He cared for his son enough to put him to school, and when, in early manhood, John was berated for his profanity we are allowed to see him standing before his shrill accuser, hanging down his head and wishing "with all my heart that I might be a little child again, that my father might learn me to speak without this wicked way of swearing." That his first reaction was to wish himself under his father's instruction again speaks well for Thomas. As we know, he lived to see his son become famous and reached the end of his lived to see his son become famous and reached the end of his pilgrimage as late as 1676. He signs his last will with an inverted B, declares himself "of perfit memory and Remembrance, praised bee God," and hopes through "the meritorious death and passion of Jesus Christ my only Saviour and Redeemer, to receive pardon for my sins" (See Brown: *Life of Bunyan*, Chap xiii.).

Of Margaret Bentley, who became Thomas' second wife and the mother of John, we know little more than that, as Mr. Coats says, "she was a frugal young woman," Elstow-born and bred, and that she died when John was sixteen. Long before esurient biographers had taken to visiting Elstow with pads and pencils, this young mother had faded out of all human remembrance.

Only this may be added: Mr. Coats' word "frugal" is probably a truer term for the Bunyans than any word suggestive of actual poverty. They owned their ancestral cottage, and whilst Thomas and his sons followed the tinkering it seems as if, also, they may have farmed their bit of land. Up to a point, Bunyan's *Badman* looks as if it were a mirror of his own boyhood, and in *Badman* we have this:—"He was so versed in such kind of [profane] language that neither father, nor mother,

nor brother, nor sister, nor servant, no, nor the very cattle that his father had, could escape these curses of his. I say that even the brute beasts, when he drove them or rid upon them, if they pleased not his humour, they must be sure to partake of his curses. He would wish that their legs broke, their guts out, or that the devil might fetch them, or the like." This smacks of autobiography. And as for John's own poverty at the time of his marriage ("without dish or spoon," as he informs us) this tells us no more than that, in those days, he was a happy-go-lucky spendthrift. Soldiers were not ill-paid in the Parliamentary army, and if neither soldiering nor tinkering had brought him money which would stick to him, it was no doubt his own fault.

## II

Mr. Coats has a full chapter on Bunyan as Preacher. No doubt he is right when he remarks that we may be sure that in Bunyan's own eyes the "most glorious moment of his life was reached" when he became pastor of Gifford's Church. Nevertheless, it is something we are apt to forget. No one is in danger of thinking of Spurgeon as the author of *John Ploughman's Talk* and incidentally a preacher. Yet Bunyan, who was the Spurgeon of his age, has so eclipsed his own fame as a preacher that we need the reminder that after all *The Pilgrim's Progress*, flung off as a diversion ("to keep me from worsier thoughts which make me do amiss") was very far from being the main business of his life. "When Mr. Bunyan preached in London," says Doe, "if there were but one day's notice given, there would be more people come together . . . than the meeting-house would hold. I have seen to hear him preach, by my computation, about twelve hundred at a morning lecture, by seven o'clock, on a working day, in the dark winter-time." He has seen him, he says, "pulled almost over people to get upstairs" to the pulpit, while half the congregation were "fain to go back again for want of room." To let the imagination focus upon such scenes as this is to realise that, for his own times, the Bedford brazier was something more than simply the author of an immortal allegory,—that, for all Christian time, he must rank among the great evangelists of the Church.

Mr Coats makes the best possible choice for a specimen of Bunyan's preaching. He selects the sermon on the text, . . . "*Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*" It is true that this discourse was delivered when Bunyan's powers were rapidly failing; he was death-struck when he preached it; but it has the advantage of coming to us without that elaboration and expansion by which

he transformed most of his discourses into treatises. As Oforr says, "it bears strong marks of having been published from notes taken by one of the hearers." Certainly it is altogether *Bunyan*. For a moment we may turn to it here.

The preacher gets quickly to his "doctrine," namely—"Men that believe in Jesus Christ, to the effectual receiving of Jesus Christ, they are born to it;" and very soon he has found "a similitude or two" between the new-born soul and the new-born child, and is well away. Healthy babies are *criers*, and "if you be not criers there is no spiritual life in you" (Yet "Oh! how many prayerless professors are there in London that never pray! Coffee houses will not let you pray, traders will not let you pray, looking-glasses will not let you pray; but if you was born of God, you would.") And so through a homely analogy that naturally unfolds itself:—a Christian must "crave the breast"—the milk of the Word—; must be swaddled in the Promises; must be kept and comforted "on the knee of God"; should show some likeness to his Father; must learn the ways of his Father's house; must learn to depend on his Father—to "run home" to Him and tell Him all; must learn to love the rest of the family. "If you are the children of God, live together lovingly. If the world quarrel with you it is no matter, but it is sad if you quarrel together; if this be amongst you it is a sign of ill-breeding . . . Dost thou see a soul that has the image of God in him? Love him! Love him! Say, This man and I must go to heaven one day."—and thus in quaint and homely appeal to the end, "that you may look your Father in the face, with comfort, another day." Then, sermon being done, the preacher himself goes home to loving friend Strudwick's at Snow Hill, and in "another day" or two—less than two weeks—the post is spurring to Bedford with word that "our dear brother Bunyan" is no more.

How does this preaching compare with the preaching, say, of Tillotson, or the best the National Church could produce? The answer must be that there can be no comparison: but a truly comprehensive National Church should have found room for both. Had this been done—had Bunyan with his artless inspiration and homely effectiveness found liberty of prophesying within the Church of his childhood, ecclesiastical history would have taken a new turn, in England.

### III

No space is left to deal with the most engaging section of Mr. Coats' study—his treatment of the Dream itself. He accepts Dr. Brown's theory that the first part was begun in 1676, when

Bunyan was in the lock-up on the bridge.—“Beneath him was the din of this world’s traffic, the murmur of pedestrians, the clattering of horses’ hoofs, the rumbling of carts and waggons, the swishing of water against stone piers, as the Ouse crept slow eastward toward the Fens.” The second part was written in 1685—the period of the Monmouth rising and the Bloody Assize—when Bunyan was no more than three years from the end of his own pilgrimage.

Mr. Coats contributes a valuable and penetrating comparison between the earlier and later sections of the allegory. He has nothing in common with the unco’ critical who see in the second part an inferior piece of writing. Most literary sequels, he admits, turn out to be failures, but Bunyan’s was a triumph. The unity is preserved because, though the characters in the second pilgrimage are different and their adventures different also, yet the spirit of Christian dominates the entire narrative. “The two parts supplement each other in that the first deals with the Christian life in its solitary aspect, the second in its social.” A subtle but illuminating observation is the marked difference in *pace* between the earlier and later narratives. This is plain enough—once it is pointed out. Christian is really the Heavenly Footman; he sets off at a run, and he is in haste to the end. “The Second part, on the other hand, gives one the impression of much greater leisureliness and ease.” This is true; and Mr. Coats must carry us with him when he remarks the broader humanity and kindlier, cheerier spirit of the later section. Bunyan himself was mellowing.

“Every reader must notice that there is far more feasting and junketing in the second book than in the first. The pilgrims are merry and jocund as they take their journey. No wonder: as many as four weddings are celebrated by the way. At every turn princely hospitality is extended to the wanderers. . . . They meet in ‘a very fair dining-room,’ where excellent fare is put before them, butter and honey and ‘milk well crumbled.’ So pleasant, indeed, is the company, so delectable are the viands, that all sit round the table cracking nuts, telling stories, opening riddles, till at last Old Honest drowsily nods as night wears itself out and dawn creeps stealthily up the eastern sky.”

Enough has been said, it may be hoped, to whet the reader’s appetite for a rich and refreshing book. One rises from its perusal with a quickened sense of the greatness of Bunyan. “All that you miss in Shakespeare,” says Mr. Shaw, “you find in Bunyan,” namely, the true heroic, rising above all pondering of

personal misfortune or mortality into the sense of being used for a transcendent purpose. And indeed had Bunyan attained to no other reputation than that of being the most popular evangelical preacher of his age, he would have deserved remembrance. Had he written no other allegory than *The Holy War* his literary fame would have been assured. Even as the village-bred tinker and soldier who, in an era of sects and schisms and vulgar bigotries, stood for a broad Churchmanship based upon "faith in Christ and moral duties gospelised," his candle might have continued to shine. As the author of no more than *The Life of Badman* he would have earned remembrance for his swarthy prose—might even have taken his place as the founder of the modern novel. And had he written no other classic than *Grace Abounding* his immortality as the supreme religious genius of English Evangelicalism would have stood secure. But at every turn he astonishes us; not least of all in the sheer courage of his intellect. "Let Truth," he cries, "be free to make her sallies." He steers clear of the wild apocalypticism of his day and affirms a providential law of progress. He will not build upon outward ordinances, however Scriptural:—"I count them not the fundamentals of our Christianity." He dismisses as against reason and conscience the prevalent dogma of indiscriminate, uniform perdition:—"Why should a poor, silly, ignorant man, though damned, be punished with the same degree of torment that he that has lived a thousand times worse shall be punished with? It cannot be; justice will not admit it; guilt and the quality of transgression will not admit it." In his tirades against social injustice he is as vehement and pungent as Cobbett. He composes rhymes and riddles for children. And for a pastime he writes—*The Pilgrim's Progress*.

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