

Alexander McLaren.

ANTICIPATION of the approaching assembly of the Baptist Union at Manchester inevitably stirs thoughts of that prince of preachers, Alexander McLaren. Known to history as McLaren of Manchester, some of us naturally associate him also with Stepney College and Portland Chapel, Southampton.

In an address to the students of Regent's Park College, many years ago, the late Dr. Thomas Phillips referred to three great men who went from Stepney College in three successive student generations. They were John Pulsford, afterwards Dr. John Pulsford, the great mystic and author of *Quiet Hours*, whom the speaker described as serving the truth in great chunks, sometimes upside down; Alexander McLaren, the greatest pulpit expositor of the nineteenth century; and Edward Luscombe Hull, a great and gracious spirit, whose ministry was brilliant but brief. Two of these, John Pulsford and Alexander McLaren, were associated with the early history of Portland Chapel, Southampton, but the third of the great Portland trio was another Regent's Park student, James Spurgeon, afterwards (like Pulsford and McLaren) Dr. James Spurgeon.

McLaren, who was the youngest of a family of six, was born in Glasgow on 11th February, 1826. He entered Glasgow University at the age of fifteen, but, owing to the family removing to London shortly after, his college course there was cut short, and, Oxford and Cambridge then being closed to Dissenters, he entered Stepney College, under the presidency of Dr. Benjamin Davies, at the age of sixteen. He was only twenty when he assumed the position of pastor of Portland Chapel, and such was the caution both of the Church and of the minister that he came for three months on trial.

Like many other great churches, Portland Chapel, Southampton, has had its ups and downs. I have heard it remarked by people, whose memory carried them back as far as the vacancy before Mr. Mackie came, that the morning congregation could have sat in one pew, or as one more picturesquely put it, could have got into two cabs. But it is sober truth that in Mr. Ford's time, McLaren's predecessor, the building was put up to auction owing to the foreclosing of the mortgage, and bought in again, and the membership roll restarted with twelve names, including those of the pastor and his wife.

That McLaren's task was not an easy one is substantiated

by the simple but eloquent fact that such a ministry as his in twelve years only resulted in increasing the membership from forty-five to one hundred and forty-nine. The idea that McLaren suddenly filled Portland Chapel is as legendary as his supposed habit of waiting as long as two minutes for the right word, or his appearing in the pulpit in flannels. As evidence of the contemporary view of his work the following may be quoted from the illuminated address which was presented to McLaren on his leaving Southampton, and now hangs in the Church Parlour of Portland Chapel: "We remember, too, how slowly the clouds cleared away, how painfully the upward path was climbed, how in face of many temptations to despair, you manfully stood to your post and resolved to hope." At the end of seven years the membership was still under eighty.

The legend of the duck trousers and light flannel coat and waistcoat, by the way, is connected with Above Bar pulpit, perhaps to explain the early dislike of its illustrious occupant, Rev. Thomas Adkins, for this young preacher. But the young preacher's unconventional utterances would probably be a sufficient shock for Mr. Adkins, without the white trousers.

McLaren was always a student. His mornings and, as far as possible his evenings, he gave to study. In his younger days his afternoons were given to walks, in his later days to rest. He rarely visited, but in his earlier years gave much time to classes and lectures, and in his later years to the preparation of his monumental work.

After being ten years in Southampton he married his cousin Marion McLaren. So far he seems to have refused to preach at any vacant church, though he had a call, which he turned down, from St. Andrew's Street, Cambridge, in 1851. Persuaded by both Thomas Binney and Edward Miall that he ought to have a larger sphere, on being asked to preach at Union Church, Manchester, he did so. Asked to preach again he refused, but was sent a call, which he accepted, not without genuine sorrow at leaving Southampton.

The idea that he left because the members refused to enlarge the building for him is not substantiated by any known facts. At any rate, he left with real sorrow on both sides. At the church meeting at which he announced his decision to accept the call to Manchester, both he and a deacon broke down when trying to speak. At his farewell meeting he was presented with the illuminated address already referred to, which was given to the Church by the family after his death. The sorrow of his departure was mingled in at least one instance with some resentment, an old man being heard to say, "I'm not pleased with the young man. We learned him to run, and now he's runned away!"

Whether he was a "born" preacher or not, he certainly was a "born" scholar, and seems to have become a great preacher by dint of faithfulness and hard work. If ever a man refused to be or do anything less than his best it was McLaren.

His ministry at Manchester lasted forty-five years. He became to that city what Dale was to Birmingham and Watson to Liverpool, and his influence was such that at least one man, whom it was my privilege to know, used to journey from Liverpool and back every week to be present at McLaren's weeknight service, no matter how busy a day my friend might have had.

When I was at the Baptist Union Meetings in Manchester in 1913, his spirit seemed to dominate them. I shall never forget Dr. Gould's reference to "a voice that is still." I was entertained by his daughter, Mrs. Le Jeune, from whom I received many interesting sidelights upon his character. And I remember standing before his portrait in the Manchester Art Gallery and feeling that he still lived.

His work in Manchester ended in 1903, but he lived seven years longer and passed away in May, 1910. My first attendance at a Baptist Union Assembly was in 1910, and the message sent to McLaren from that assembly a few days before he died is one of my outstanding memories of those meetings.

There is a great diversity in God's gifts, as Paul points out in more places than one. And in nothing is this seen more clearly than in preaching. Think of the varying gifts of Spurgeon, Robertson, Newman, Parker, Clifford and McLaren! But probably not one of them came as near to fulfilling the ideal of the Apostle Paul, as expressed in 2 Timothy ii. 15, as did McLaren. His sole concern was rightly to handle the Word of God. His was a type of preaching that does not set the heather on fire, but the lesson of his ministry is this, that the faithful study of God's Word wedded to a consecration of all a man's gifts and time to preaching, in the end triumphs, and proves that the most varied and refreshing preaching is that which draws its inspiration from, and seeks its foundation in, the perennially fresh and eternally lasting Word of God.

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