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Outstanding Literary and Human Factors of my Life

[What follows appeared originally in the columns of the "Brecon and Radnor Baptist," March-July, 1911, and was subsequently reprinted in a pamphlet illustrated by seven portraits. We are grateful to the Dean of St. David's Cathedral, the Rev. C. Witton Davies, for making available to us a copy of this rare pamphlet and thus providing an opportunity of reproducing these valuable autobiographical notes by a distinguished Baptist scholar of earlier days. Below the title on the front page of the pamphlet comes the following:—By T. WITTON DAVIES, B.A., Ph.D., D.D., Professor of Semitic Languages, University College of North Wales, Bangor; formerly for two years Pastor of the High Street Baptist Church, Merthyr Tydfil; for eleven years Classical Tutor of the Haverfordwest Baptist College; for seven years Principal of the Midland Baptist College, Nottingham; and for seven years Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Religion at the Baptist College, Bangor.]

Probably no living Professor of Baptist or University College or University had up to his 22nd year so poor a start as I, for when midway between my 21st and 22nd birthday I had practically all my educational work to do, though at that age most young men who have become professors or won distinctions as scholars had taken their degree with honours and perhaps carried away University fellowships as well. It is interesting and suggestive to note that in many cases unusual distinction in scholarship in early life has been followed by quite ordinary achievement in subsequent years. This is the case in Wales more than in England and especially more than in Scotland, if my own observation, extending now over many years, has not misled me. When a Welshman has won high University honours and secured a comfortable position with a living wage, he is very apt to feel that the acme of his career has been reached and what remains is to enjoy his well-earned (?) honour and ease. There are, of course, striking exceptions, but I am convinced that I have not overstated the general situation. I have often endeavoured to bring home to my

pupils two great principles:—1. That constant hard work after leaving college is of immeasurably greater moment as bearing upon their lifework than any amount of mere academic brilliance during student days. The work at college covers but, say, at most six or seven years; the subsequent years may, however, run up to fifty or sixty, for Dr. James Martineau, my own teacher for one memorable session, worked as hard at 90 as at 30 and produced his ablest works after passing his 80th birthday. Dr. A. B. Fairbairn did practically nothing in his Scottish student days, not passing a single University examination, yet as teacher and writer in mature years he has been the envy of University prizemen and Fellows. It is very marvellous to see what plod combined with strong moral and religious principles has done. 2. I have tried also to make my students realise that the foundation—no more than that—for future work and success is laid in most cases in what are called “student days,” though in my own case I was never so much a student as today at nearly sixty. At college or at University the most valuable lesson to learn is not Greek or Hebrew or Philosophy or Science, but self-mastery; the power to make oneself work, to create the mood, as George Eliot said she did, when it is not present. Students are prescribed work in subjects they don't like: these are the very subjects they should bend their wills to work at with all their souls. If one has gained the power to work it brings with it infinitely greater pleasure and satisfaction than the lackadaisical student, preacher or professor can enjoy, who spends most of his time over his newspaper, or with his pipe and the newest novel, or lounging in bed or in an arm-chair.

I should like to be understood. Apart from purely academic reading, every student will wander at his own sweet will along literary roads and by-lanes, in which he finds himself he hardly knows how. For this purpose it is of the utmost consequence that the young student should be within reach of libraries in which the great master-minds are well represented—Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, Browning, Ruskin, Carlyle, and the like. The student should be tempted by the presence of such great literature in the College library to browse in many fields outside the class work; I have found such general reading immeasurably more stimulating and intellectually creative than the work of the class, but the class work has all along supplied a splendid antidote against dissipation of thought and energy. All men should have general literary and I will add artistic interests, but dominating their aims and achievements there should be a ruling purpose making all they do bend to itself and minister to self-realisation. The ideal to hold before the student is: work hard, definitely and indefinitely, at College

and University; but be sure to keep on, for this is still more urgent, after you have quitted the academic halls. My experience tells me that a lazy and indifferent student makes a lazy and indifferent minister. John Thomas, of Liverpool, and Thomas Phillips, of Bloomsbury, London—to name Welsh Baptists only—would not have been the hard workers they are today if in student days they had not learned the lesson of work.

Speaking in a general way, up to my 27th birthday books had more to do with my intellectual development than men. Afterwards the very contrary was the fact, as will appear before I have completed what I have to say. Unlike Lord Beaconsfield, who was said to have been born in a library, I was reared in what was practically a bookless home. My parents were of the working class and always lived in a small house, though they were industrious and frugal and saved money enough to build three decent working-men's houses, in the largest of which (it had four small rooms) they lived the later years of their lives. Both my parents were renowned for the uprightness of their character and their honesty was proverbial, but neither had been to any day school, not to speak of college. My father could neither read nor write to the last; my mother was never able to write, but she learned to read in the Charles Street Baptist Sunday School, Newport, and became a large reader of newspapers, magazines, and of the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*; both the last as well as Watts' *Divine and Moral Songs* she knew almost by heart. The only books I remember seeing in our home except those bought by my brothers and myself, were the Bible and a Welsh edition of *Pilgrim's Progress*, the pictures in which, and the trend of the work were explained to us boys by my mother, who was in many respects—intellectually and morally—among the most remarkable women I have known. Her influence preceded that of books, and it was in its way the greatest; but I cannot trace to it any mental drift, any tendency to a special manner of thinking. While referring to the literature of our home I should be ungrateful not to mention the *Christian World*, which my mother regularly took and carefully perused, often reading articles and items of news aloud to the family, as she used to read out the *British Workman* month by month. On Saturday nights we often gathered around the fire and listened with breathless interest to my dear mother reading to us from these and other papers. When I entered Pontypool College I was conscious of a wider outlook in theological matters than the bulk of the students, though some, like John Meredith, now of Hereford, had read more widely and had wider sympathies than I. But I owe my first inclination to think outside the narrow Strict Baptist groove in which I was reared to the influence of the

Christian World, in my opinion the greatest religious journal of the nineteenth century. I am wishful to add that nothing I had read in the *Christian World* shook my position as a Baptist; but I was made more tolerant of other people's opinions and more inclined to read and consider what non-Baptists say.

Though there were no books in my home except the Bible and (in Welsh) *Pilgrim's Progress*, we had a local Mechanic's Institute with some four hundred volumes of various kinds. When midway in my 'teens or so I borrowed Smiles' *Self Help* and read it with much avidity. When I had set down the book I felt that I had no need to spend the whole of my life in the iron-works—others had risen from positions as low as mine: why not I? From the same library I borrowed Barnes' notes on the Gospels and read the book, text, and notes, from cover to cover; I still remember almost word for word some of the notes. This gave me an interest in Bible study which has never left me. In our local Mutual Improvement Society, presided over by Thomas Jerman Jones, Calvinistic Methodist Minister, we read for study and criticism Dr. Walker's *Philosophy of the Plan of Salvation*, and I entered into the course of the reasoning in that suggestive book with all my heart. This gave me my first impetus in the direction of theological science. In my preaching and in my theological lectures I have frequently, almost unconsciously, reproduced the reasoning of this book. Yet I must say its influence upon me was of a general and superficial kind and further reading and independent study have shown me that the book, which for the time stirred me so much, was no real contribution to the solution of the problem dealt with, though to me it did then seem to be that and more. I had in some mysterious way got to know Byron's poetry and bought Dick's Shilling Edition of that poet's works. Some of Lord Byron's poetry rather shocked me, but the interest I got to take in the poet's sad life and in his romantic poetry helped to break the shell of my narrow dogmatism and attracted me to things which the theologians and churches of the time cared little about. It is from this time that I date my love for poetry, never indeed very deep, but still sufficiently so to make an important difference in my views and tastes.

When I became a student of the Pontypool College in August, 1872, I had read no great masterpiece of literature. I prepared for my classes conscientiously and soon with the aid of translations became able to read Vergil and Homer, and was charmed by the new world into which I had entered. But by some good fortune which I can never appraise too highly, I began to read the works of Thomas Carlyle and later those of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. I think it was Joseph Davies, Fforddlas, who died at

Ruthin soon after leaving College, who first made me think of Carlyle, whose works he was often reading. I am quite sure it was through the influence of William Casnodyn Rhys, now pastor of York Place, Swansea, that I became a student of the writings of Coleridge. Go into Rhys's study and you would find almost any time in his hand a copy of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* or some other work of this great metaphysical poet. Three books by Carlyle read by me in the first session at College revolutionised my inner life and made me look at ethical and religious problems in a new light:—*Sartor Resartus*—the greatest book, judged by its effect, that I ever read, taught me to aim at being real; to think little or nothing of appearances or what the world thinks, so long as one is true to one's own light. *Heroes and Hero-Worship* completed the process begun long before by the *Christian World* making me value genuine goodness and greatness whether found among heathen, Moslems or Christians. *Past and Present* drove home to me the kernel thoughts of other books, and sowed the seeds of other thoughts. I have read, more or less, other works by Carlyle, but none have wrought upon me the subtle and lasting influence of the above books. Yet I have always thought that Carlyle's teaching goes perilously near to making greatness equivalent to goodness; just as the churches of my youth made orthodoxy do duty for all the virtues.

The one book by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the reading of which made an epoch in my life, was his *Aids to Reflection*. The works read at the College for university purposes were chiefly the works of Alexander Bain and John Stuart Mill. Unfortunately for me, during most of my college career my dearly loved tutor, Rev. W. Mortimer Lewis, M.A., was away ill, and I had to do my university work alone in almost everything. I had been influenced by the experientialism and sensationalism of Bain and Mill, and the foundation of religion seemed going from under my feet. It was this wonderful work by Coleridge that helped to restore for my soul theological terra-firma. What he teaches over and over in that book is the doctrine put forth by Paul in 1 *Corinthians* ii. 14 ("Spiritual things are spiritually discerned"). Coleridge would have all men make a sharp difference between the conclusions of the Understanding (Greek *dianoia*) and those of the Reason. In the former we reason on data supplied by the sensations, emotions, etc.; in the latter we see immediately by an act of intuition, using what the Greeks call *nous*. I have since read and thought much about theological subjects: I have followed the theological lectures of Dr. Angus at Regent's Park College, and those of some German teachers (E. W. Mayer, Strasburg, etc.), and for seven years I was Professor of Systematic Theology at

the Nottingham College, delivering my own lectures. But all my theological thinking took its direction from my careful reading of the above work by Coleridge, and also J. H. Green's two volumes, *Spiritualistic Philosophy founded on the teaching of S. T. Coleridge* (1865).

It is perhaps a singular confession to make, but it is a true one nevertheless, that of the thousands of books read in subsequent years no one has told upon my life or manner of thinking to anything like the same extent of the very few books mentioned above. This is in part owing to the greater sensitiveness of the youthful mind. But when I had read and assimilated at College the books mentioned I had made up my mind as to the centralities of ethics and religion: what was needed was to lay the foundations deeper and to fill in the details of the structure.

But of Biography I have always, since I learnt in the Sunday School to read, been a devoted student, and I have probably in my library of over 17,000 volumes as large a collection of biographical literature as can be found in any private house. The life of Robertson of Brighton, by Stopford Brooke, gave me in College days a strong impetus to aim at what is truest and best in preaching. For me it taught the doctrine of Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* as it affects the preacher, "Be real, be true; don't preach because you are paid to do it, or because your church tells you; think for yourself, and tell the people what you have felt and seen of the Divine Vision."

Soon after settling down at Haverfordwest Baptist College I read with deep interest Dean Stanley's life of that great teacher—Dr. Thomas Arnold, of Rugby. From this marvellous "Life" I gained a very high conception of the office of teacher, and in subsequent years I have tried to embody in my own work as teacher the best points in the character of Dr. Arnold. How very far I have come short of the ideal no one knows so well as the present writer, but I will say that I have prayed and tried, and pray and try still. I think it is an admirable plan for anyone aspiring after success in any walk of life to study the lives of men and women who attained to the success which he desires. This has been my own practice, and is still. I have been sometimes commended in certain quarters for industry; but a study of the lives of John Calvin, the greatest of Bible exegetes, and Ewald, the brilliant orientalist and theologian, has shown me that I am a very do-nothing in comparison with these and other men of similar achievements. When I was a pastor and in student days when the work of a pastor alone fired my ambition, I read the biographies of those who had achieved distinction as ministers of the Gospel. But I have read the biographies of men who have become famous in other departments

of thought and action — statesmen, merchants, poets, painters, historians—and this has tended to widen my interest in human life and to lessen the cramping tendency of excessive specialism. There hardly passes a single month without my reading a fresh biography, and I have the habit of jotting down at the close of the volume the points which strike me most and seem most worth noting.

T. WITTON DAVIES.

(To be Concluded)

The Faith of a Surgeon, by W. D. Lovelock-Jones, F.R.C.S.
(Carey Kingsgate Press Ltd., 9d.)

This pamphlet is a reprint from the *Baptist Quarterly* and has presumably been separately issued for the help of those who are concerned to find the right attitude to suffering, either from the side of those trying to help the sick or from that of the sick themselves. It has been known for a man to complain of having pain and, after having various tests which all give a negative result, to be told that there is nothing wrong with him. Mr. Lovelock-Jones will have none of this. To him one treats a patient not a disease and, moreover, a patient is a man who cannot be analysed into physical, mental and spiritual parts: he is a one and indivisible whole. This is a most healthy emphasis, and as the author goes on to develop his belief in the oneness of man as the creation of God, he manages in a very small compass to give us a new and heartening slant upon what we used to call physical illness. This is a most useful little book to place in the hands of all who are interested in the problem of illness, not as a test-tube condition, but as a state in which God's glorious will for men is not yet done.

DENIS LANT.

The Bible for Boys and Girls. (Philosophical Library, New York, \$3.50).

Here are selections from the A.V., not in the usual chapter-and-verse form, but divided into stories, incidents and other appropriate passages, illustrated by 31 colour plates. About 30 pages of Bible poetry are followed at the end by maps and a useful glossary. Handy-sized and attractive, it should well serve in school and home the purpose for which it has been issued.