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Spurgeon and Gladstone

THE historian of the Victorian period is often profoundly grateful that the Victorians were inveterate compilers of scrapbooks. Evidence of the assiduous industry with which press cuttings, photographs, engravings and autograph letters were collected and, with meticulous care, posted in specially manufactured scrapbooks, can be found in the remarkable series of scrapbooks relating to the life of C. H. Spurgeon in the possession of Spurgeon's College, London. Many of these were compiled by Rev. Joseph W. Harrald, Spurgeon's personal secretary whom he used to describe as his "armour bearer." Material for others was gathered, the evidence suggests, by Miss Flora Mary Spurgeon, the great preacher's youngest sister. Miss Spurgeon, it is interesting to note, was awarded the first prize of ten pounds for the best "Teacher's Scrapbook" in a competition organised by *The Sunday School Chronicle* in 1888.¹ It is worth remarking that none of the numerous biographers of Spurgeon seem to have utilised any of the material preserved in the scrapbooks.²

In one devoted to recording the celebrations which attended Spurgeon's fiftieth birthday the writer recently discovered two letters from W. E. Gladstone to Spurgeon. They should be added, as hitherto unpublished sources, to the documentary evidence for the friendship of these two great Victorian public figures which is set out in the article by the late Principal H. S. Curr in *The Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. XI, (1942-45), pp. 46-54.

The first letter may easily be set within its historical context. On Sunday evening, January 8th, 1882, Gladstone visited the Metropolitan Tabernacle for divine worship. After his visit Spurgeon wrote to Gladstone remarking on the unfavourable comment which the Prime Minister's presence at a nonconformist place of worship had aroused in some sections of the press, and enclosing a book of views of Westwood, his private residence. Gladstone replied enclosing two photographs, one of Hawarden Castle and the other of himself in his study. This letter, dated January 16th, is printed in Spurgeon's autobiography, volume IV, p. 184. The letter discovered by the writer followed; Gladstone evidently wanted Spurgeon to have a better photograph of Hawarden.

10, Downing Street,
Whitehall.
Jan. 25, 82.

Dear Mr. Spurgeon,

I found at Hawarden yesterday a better representation of the residence, and I do myself the pleasure to ask your acceptance of it. Believe me

Faithfully yours,
W. E. Gladstone.

The second letter congratulates Spurgeon on reaching his fiftieth birthday on June 19th, 1884. To celebrate this event a sum of £4,500 was raised by public subscription. Spurgeon, with characteristic generosity, gave this away. Gladstone's letter is a remarkable tribute to "the Prince of preachers," even when allowance is made for its congratulatory character. Certainly it cannot have been often, if ever, that such a letter has come from 10, Downing Street to a nonconformist preacher.

Private

10, Downing Street,

Whitehall.

June 18, 1884.

My dear Sir,

I cannot avoid writing a line to offer you my hearty congratulations upon the approach of a day full of interest to many who stand beyond the circle, wide as it is, of your immediate hearers, followers and denominational brethren.

I believe that both you and I belong to the number of those who think that all conscientious convictions, once formed, ought to be stoutly maintained, and who would therefore be called strong Denominationalists.

But without prejudice to this persuasion, and outside the points by which our positions are marked off, there happily exists a vast inheritance of truth which we enjoy in common, and which in its central essence forms, so I rejoice to think, the basis of the faith of Christendom. I therefore ask to unite my voice with the voice of thousands in acknowledging the singular power with which you have so long testified before the world "of sin, of righteousness and of judgment," and the splendid uprightness of public character and conduct, which have I believe contributed perhaps equally with your eloquence and mental gifts to win for you so wide an admiration.

I remain my dear Sir,

With sincere respect,

Very faithfully yours,

W. E. Gladstone.

Spurgeon's friendship with Gladstone was on a personal level, but it is worth raising the question as to whether it had any political significance with regard to the cause of Liberalism in the country at large. Spurgeon did not mind who knew of his Liberal sympathies nor, indeed, of his antipathy toward the Tories. He was the acknowledged leader of the evangelical wing of nonconformity. The friendship of Spurgeon was, therefore, worth possessing not

only for its own sake, but also for the indirect political benefits it could carry with it. A Liberal election handbill of the 1892 electoral campaign preserved in one of the Spurgeon scrapbooks seems to bear out the writer's contention that Spurgeon's political influence was not unimportant. To appreciate the poster one has to remember that in 1886 Spurgeon publicly expressed his strong disapproval of Gladstone's plan to grant home rule to Ireland.³ Clearly Spurgeon's opposition was keenly felt by the Liberal Party, because the handbill quotes from a letter of Spurgeon to Rev. Charles Williams which was written in 1886. Williams read this letter to a public meeting at Accrington on June 27th, 1892. The letter seemed to show that Spurgeon had had second thoughts about his strictures on Gladstone's plan. This was enough for the Liberal candidate. Spurgeon is quoted under the heading : "The late C. H. Spurgeon on Home Rule. Second Thoughts of a great and good man, 'who being dead yet speaketh'." A candid reader will no doubt think that Spurgeon's approval is qualified, but that did not matter to the Liberal electioneer. "The Bill is not what it was at first. Then I thought it reckless. A Home Rule Bill which will suit all three kingdoms would be a fine experiment, and then, if more became needful, more could be given. It may be, as you say, that Mr. Gladstone sees further than the rest of us. O God, bless him. Anyhow, I am his ardent admirer."⁴

Spurgeon was not, as he himself said, a political parson, but it would be wrong to assume that he was without political influence. The handbill shows that his opinions, when publicly expressed, carried weight. The nonconformist vote played a large part in Liberal electoral success, yet paradoxically enough the Liberal leader was an Anglican of what Spurgeon would have called the "Puseyite" variety. How valuable then to Gladstone was the friendship of Spurgeon not only personally but also politically.

NOTES

¹ Scrap-book compiled by Miss Flora Mary Spurgeon, hereinafter designated as F.M.S. Scrap-book.

² For the illustrations used in the new and revised edition of Spurgeon's autobiography recently published by the Banner of Truth Trust (London, November, 1962) under the title *The Early Years* (Vols. I and II of the first edition are now incorporated into a single volume), I have drawn upon these scrap-books.

³ Spurgeon objected to Gladstone's plan to give home rule to Ireland because in his view it would have meant the abandonment of the Ulster loyalists to a Roman Catholic political majority, and an established Irish Roman Catholic Church. "The whole scheme," he said, "is as full of danger and absurdities as if it came from a madman" (1886). Quoted in *Review of Reviews*, August 15th, 1895, pasted in F.M.S. Scrap-book.

⁴ F.M.S. Scrap-book.