

ART. VII.—ROBERT BROWN-BORTHWICK.

THE Church of England has always numbered amongst her ministers men whose influence and authority have extended over a far wider sphere than might have been expected from their official position. Of such sort were George Herbert, and Keble, and Charles Simeon, and F. W. Robertson, to mention only a very few of the more conspicuous names. And, in a minor degree, the same may be said of the subject of this little sketch, Robert Brown-Borthwick, whose comparatively early death the Church is now deploring. Officially he occupied no great position, though the present writer has heard, on the best authority, that if Archbishop Thomson had lived a little longer, Mr. Borthwick would have had the offer of a canonry. But his influence was, in truth, quite independent of all titular distinctions. He had done good work for the Church and for the religious world in general, and, as a consequence, his name had become widely known. No one knew better than he the kind of music that best suits the services of the Church of England. It belongs to the genius of that Church to steer a middle course between the sensuousness natural to a semi-pagan ritual, and the harshness and baldness which have come to be associated with the opposite extreme of worship. A certain chastened stateliness; a sweet severity of self-restraint; above all, an instinct of unflinching reverence—these are the qualities that should characterize her music. There was a time, not so very long ago, when a real danger threatened the music of the sanctuary. Hymns almost erotic in their character had crept into some of the most popular hymn-books, and, wedded to luscious tunes, had captivated certain classes of church-goers. But the effect had been to reduce the singing to a level in which the appeal was rather to the lower than to the nobler faculties of man's nature. The present writer has been told, on the authority of one of the first musicians in England, that a tune at that time very popular in some of our churches was in reality "The Rattacher's Daughter" very slightly modified. It would be too much to say that Mr. Borthwick was the principal agent in counteracting this dangerous tendency in the church-music of the day, but it is certain that he was one of the first to recognise the danger, and one of those most resolute in resisting it. And there can be no doubt that, in the conflict of tendencies, "The Supplemental Hymn and Tune Book," which he edited, and which ran through several editions, did much towards the promotion of a sober and reverent style in church-music. The battle is pretty well over now, so far as the Church of England is concerned. Under God's providence she has escaped

from the dryness and dulness of Tate and Brady, without having suffered any serious damage from the temporary reaction into the extreme of mere sweetness and prettiness. It has now come to be generally understood that a "taking" tune is not everything; that the service of the sanctuary should have a character of its own; and that no church-music is worthy of the name unless it tends to chasten the emotions and to quicken the sense of awe and reverence which lies at the root of the religious instinct.

But Mr. Borthwick was not only the composer of many admirable hymn-tunes; he was also the writer of many beautiful hymns. It is true that no one of these has fastened itself in the memory of the religious public like the masterpieces of Wesley and Toplady and Ellerton. To few is it given to write a hymn which shall live for ever in the hearts of men. But several of Mr. Borthwick's hymns have been incorporated into the best collections, and have met with a fair meed of appreciation. And they made him so well known that when the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge were projecting a new hymn-book, they invited him to become one of the four editors. The book, as everyone knows, had a great success. It was not perfect; no hymn-book can be. Much must be left out which cannot be spared without loss; some things are retained which were better omitted. But "Church Hymns" supplied a real want, and, on the whole, supplied it satisfactorily. Millions of copies have been sold, and it has been generally conceded that the editors have done their work well, and have compiled a hymn-book not unworthy of the Church of England.

This was, no doubt, the kind of work by which Mr. Borthwick was most widely known. But he did much other work equally good of its kind, though appealing to a smaller public. His translations from the French are admirable. His sermons had a peculiar staccato incisiveness; the short, epigrammatic sentences seemed, as it were, to stab the consciousness of the listener, and to remain fixed thereafter in the memory. He was a great organizer, and indefatigable in the work of his parish; and he was generous with a generosity of the rarest type.

This is but a meagre sketch of one whose gifts were great and various. But the real record of such a character is written in the hearts of those who loved him, or who have been influenced by him. He has done his work; he has entered upon his reward. And, so long as such lives as his are lived, none, even in these days of nerveless pessimism, need despair of the future of humanity.

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