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The Work and Worth of Wesley.¹

BY THE REV. A. H. T. CLARKE, M.A.

THE recent Wesley Centenary has given birth to some useful biographies of the Apostle of England. Of these Lives the last in point of time is the first in point of worth. It comes, indeed, with a peculiar grace from the pen of Dr. Fitchett that he who has told us in so many heroic tales how England saved Europe should now tell us how Wesley saved England.

Let us review some of the conditions of the times that first required and then produced John Wesley. The gigantic effort on the part of Rome, working through the political medium of the French King, to recover her old ascendancy over Europe, had been completely foiled by Marlborough's counterstroke at the Battle of Blenheim. But a more insidious enemy than Louis or the Pope yet remained.

"We conquer'd France, but felt our captive's charms ;
Her arts victorious triumph'd o'er our arms."

The evil genius of Voltaire was slowly permeating Europe. Through his friendship for Frederick II. of Prussia it passed into Germany. Through his other friend, Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke, Voltaire obtained introduction to the *salons* of London. Meanwhile the shock which the feudal notions of loyalty had received through the change of dynasty involved in the Hanoverian succession sent all the clergy *en masse* into Whiggery, and accentuated all the worst bitternesses of political and ecclesiastical party-strife. Deism became the prevailing creed of all classes of society. This in its passage through the English Church took from Tillotson the name and form of Reasonableness, and among the Nonconformist bodies became

¹ 1. "Wesley and his Century," by Rev. W. H. Fitchett, LL.D., author of "Deeds that won the Empire," "How England Saved Europe," etc. (Smith, Elder), 6s. net. 2. "John Wesley, Evangelist," by Rev. Richard Green (R.T.S.), 6s. net. 3. "Wesley and his Preachers: their Conquest of Britain," by G. H. Pike (Fisher Unwin), 3s. 6d. 4. "John Wesley" ("The Westminster Biographies"), by Frank Banfield, 1s. 6d. net. 5. "Essays on Faith and Philosophy: Wesley," by Canon Gregory Smith.

frank Arianism. Spirituality had become extinct; faith was evaporated into a metaphor, and God had become, in the strong language of Sir Leslie Stephen, an idol compounded of fragments of tradition and of frozen metaphysics. To this let the lives and writings of the chief Bishops of those days (Pope's "reverend atheists") bear witness—Gibson, Lavington, Hoadly, Thomas Newton, Richard Watson, and Warburton. Bishop Burnet declared that Ember Week was the burden and grief of his life, as the "much greater part" of candidates for ordination could give "no account" of the contents of Gospel or Catechism. Every schoolboy will remember Bishop Butler's complaint, in the preface to his "Analogy," that Christianity was become more a fit subject for ridicule than serious inquiry. Religion, said the smiling Montesquieu, is unknown in England. And no wonder when the Sunday exhortations from the pulpit, not seldom mingled with oaths, advised the hearers to "take care never to overshoot ourselves, even in the pursuits of the virtues."

The advice was well taken. The novels of Fielding and Smollett, the letters of Chesterfield and Sterne, the pictures of Hogarth and Rowlandson, point that moral and adorn that tale. It was the day of mobs brutalized by the sight of public pillories and public decapitations, by cock-fights and bull-baitings, by harsh sentences in the law courts, and rows of rotting heads on Temple Bar. In the words of a contemporary poet,

"The hungry judges soon the sentence sign,
And wretches hang that jurymen may dine."

It was the day when a lady of quality was rated by her language, a lord by his gallantries, a Minister of State by his drunkenness. And above all this festering corruption lay the smooth exterior, the perfect good-breeding, the refined dissimulation of social manners. Religion was scouted as a *village virtue*, which lacked the *varnish of the vices*. Principle had ceased to exist. Patriotism, as Johnson declared and as Gibbon admitted, had become the "last refuge of a scoundrel." Compromise was the boast of the age. Witness the lines of Pope :

“ He knows to live who keeps the middle state,
 And neither leans on this side nor on that,
 Papist or Protestant, or both between,
 Like good Erasmus in an honest mean ;
 In moderation placing all my glory,
 While Tories call me Whig and Whigs a Tory.
 For virtue’s self may too much zeal be had :
 The worst of madmen is a saint run mad.”

It was an age that seemed to threaten a relapse into primitive heathenism, and called aloud for a republication of Christianity. *Audax omnia perpeti gens humana ruit per vetitum nefas.* Nor does Dr. Fitchett express himself too strongly when he says that the very light of Christianity itself was being turned by some strange and evil force into darkness.

It was a saying of Nelson’s that when things are at their worst they begin to be at their best. At England’s darkest hour John Wesley was born, June 17, 1703, the second son of nineteen children. That age was the age of reason : Wesley’s peculiar strength lay in the exercise of that faculty ; he was a poor philosopher and theologian, but a born logician. That age demanded scientific rather than moral evidence : Wesley gave to the expression of religion a scientific as well as moral value. Literature was the boast of that age, and Wesley was one of the first of Oxford *litterati*. He early mastered the principles of Hebrew and Arabic, the classics and the mathematics, was Fellow of Lincoln and Greek lecturer to his college. The age of Wesley was the age of good form : few children were more strictly brought up in this respect than the Wesley family. They addressed their father as “honoured sir” ; they never cried ; they rarely spoke, and when they spoke they always had to give a reason for what they said. At five they all knew their alphabet. At eight Hetty could read the Greek Testament, and Jackie was old enough to be admitted to the Lord’s Table. Every hour was mapped out, and this habit continued with Wesley to the last. At Charterhouse, by his father’s advice, he ran every morning without fail three times round the school garden.

These methodical habits pursued the Wesleys into their very religion. And Dr. Fitchett is honest enough to admit that in a home whose piety was "constructed on the principle of a railway time-table and with something of its mechanical effort," there was not much room for the gladness of home or the sweetness of the Gospel to grow. Wesley's parents were High Churchmen, the result of a rebound from Puritanical ancestors who had suffered severely for conscience' sake under the Stuarts. Yet to his mother Wesley owed, on its human side, all his religious genius (*cf.* 2 Tim. i. 5). Her practical wisdom matured all his best resolutions, whether it was in taking Holy Orders or in admitting lay preachers into the Church, and her inward piety had early dedicated and predesignated this particular child, plucked from the flames of a burning rectory, to the service of God. Her husband was a less intellectual and somewhat irascible Churchman, who disliked his wife's zeal in religious matters and openly toasted the King over the water. But as he lay a-dying his heart softened. Placing his hand upon the head of Charles, he solemnly said: "Be steady. The Christian faith will surely revive in this kingdom. You shall see it, though I shall not." To John he said: "The *inward witness*, son, the inward witness! That is the strongest proof of Christianity." The words burned home to the heart of John, then aged thirty-two.

Such were the "prophecies" that, as with Timothy, "went before upon" him (*cf.* 1 Tim. i. 18).

We do not propose to follow the steps of Wesley's career. That is too well known, and it would be beyond the limits of our space. We wish very briefly to throw some hints on the peculiar characteristics of the man and his work, and to show how completely he was fitted by God and Nature (to use the familiar phrase of his age) for the task before him.

In what sense was Wesley a great man? Only in a spiritual sense. "God calleth the things that are not as though they were." "When I am weak, then am I strong." Wesley was endowed with little original genius. He had no sense of

humour. He had hardly any imagination. He had no philosophic grasp of universal principles. He was neither deep nor wide. In these limitations lay his strength. To use one of Mr. Coleridge's profound and refined distinctions, he possessed in harmonious proportion all the second-rate gifts of talent (or the faculty of appropriating and applying the work of others), without the ecstasy and misery, the ideality and impulsiveness, of creative genius. It is curious to note how little originality there was in Wesley. His theology leant with unusual weight in its successive phases on the writings of À Kempis, Jeremy Taylor, and William Law, and on the conversations of General Oglethorpe, Peter Böhler, and Count Zinzendorf. In these matters when he ever became original he went wrong. Thus he believed, in despite of such clear texts as Rom. vi. 11 ("reckon") and 1 John i. 8, and the teaching of Articles IX. and XV., in sinless perfection. This Dr. Fitchett denies; but Wesley certainly averred that he "felt no carnal root." He regarded, in consequence, Rom. vii. as a description of the legal mind, notwithstanding the distinct intimations to the contrary of viii. 4, 23, 26. Surely none but the most exquisitely sensitive Christian soul could have penned the experience of that seventh chapter! The precious doctrine of our election (*cf.* Article XVII.) he scouted as unreasonable, notwithstanding St. Paul's frank admission that its mystery was above reasoning (Rom. ix. 19, 20). The truth is, it was above the reach of Wesley's metaphysics and, for his business-like views of religion, unpractical. In one sermon Wesley congratulated himself that while Luther rediscovered the doctrine of justification by faith, it was left to himself to have discovered sanctification by works—a dangerous loophole for Popery to peep in at, and a view held by several of the Fathers at Trent (contrast Rom. i. 17; Gal. iii. 3, *sq.*, v. 5; Col. ii. 6). All these serious points of divinity Wesley's biographers have overlooked.

The same unoriginality pursues Wesley everywhere. His father has to push him out of Oxford, his mother into Georgia, Whitefield into field-preaching. His brother Charles

originated the Holy Club, or first band of Methodists. George Bowers started the lay-preachers; Captain Foy the idea of class-meetings (Fitchett, pp. 205 *et seq.*, 221). A stiff High Churchman to the last, though in mind rather than in heart, he was original only in summoning the first Conference that precipitated the breach with the Church, and in ordaining the first Bishop to America. As a reader he was hasty and inaccurate, and his comments on books or on living persons are equally worthless. Nor was he a really great preacher. His sermons are acute, logical, dogmatic, and intensely earnest; but they lack a permanent human interest. They lacked also at the time both anecdote and often preparation. They are not (like the productions of genius) something for all time, but only for one age. Where, then, lay the secret of his strength? In method and in spiritual power.

1. Wesley possessed a marvellous adaptability to occasion. His practical turn of mind gave form to other men's hints. He *organized* religion and gave it a scientific shape. And his unwearying yet unhasting energy, travelling 250,000 miles a year and preaching fifteen sermons a week for over fifty years, covered England and her dependencies with a vast spiritual network that has given an impetus to every form of religious and philanthropic work since his death. In this respect he reminds us of his great-cousin, Arthur Wesley, or Wellesley, afterwards Duke of Wellington. Alike in face, in frame, in unimpassioned temper of mind, they were alike also in their long-enduring systematic patriotism, engaged each in a lifetime of some eighty years in beating back from Europe the pernicious principles of France. It has been nobly said that it is to John Wesley we owe Waterloo.

2. Back of this vast methodizing agency lay a *spiritual power* that gave to Wesley's work its sustained health and cheerfulness. "He saw," says Dr. Fitchett, "the great truths of Christianity where other men only reasoned about them, and the facts of the spiritual world were as real to him, and in some

senses as clear, as the facts of earth and sky" (p. 172). It was this that was the secret of his preaching.

"He had little imagination, his voice had no trumpet notes, but his spiritual insight was hardly less than terrible. He seemed to see into men's souls, to put his finger upon the hidden sin, the unconfessed fear. He had the power of making each man feel as though he talked to him alone. As Wesley preached there suddenly broke upon his hearers the sense of the eternal world with its tremendous issues" (pp. 180 *et seq.*, 188).

Of this style of preaching Southey, in the twelfth chapter of his incomparable biography, has given us some specimens.

Behind all this, again, lay a vivid Christian experience. He had made religion his business. His Oxford theological scrupulosities, vainly endeavouring to create an atmosphere of "sensible devotion," broke down under his fear of death as he crossed the Atlantic. After the long struggle of a naturally blameless life to attain the righteousness of the law (Phil. iii. 6), at length, on May 24, 1738, he submitted himself, in simple faith and "confident in self-despair," to the righteousness of God (Rom. x. 3). He had attained at last the heart-assurance of undoubting faith, St. Paul's *πληροφορία πίστεως*.

"All through the memorable day of [what he too strictly called] his conversion, it is curious to note how Wesley was eagerly listening [like Newman, whom he resembled] as if for some voice calling to him out of the eternal world. He seemed to catch everywhere [like Spurgeon] prophetic echoes of some coming message. The very air was full as [with Bunyan] of whispers and omens, which met him and pursued him everywhere" (Fitchett, p. 123).

From that hour he laid great and pardonable emphasis on the feeling element in religion, and quoted with peculiar pleasure those two passages in our loved Liturgy (the Visitation of the Sick and Article XVII.) which speak of our knowing and *feeling* in ourselves the working of the Spirit of Christ. This was Wesley's special message to that heartless age, whose literature and philosophy were so destructive of the finer feelings of moral evidence. To meet this need Wesley framed from a heart-felt experience a new formula in which to convey the old message. The rectory fire, from which he had been as a child so strangely rescued, became to him a spiritual symbol of the

world's lost condition. The rectory ghost deepened his early sense of the supernatural. His conversion gave him the moral and intellectual demonstration his nature needed. From that hour he preached, often to some 30,000 at a time, as a dying man to dying men, as one

“ Who hath heard the words of God,
Who hath seen the vision of the Almighty,
Falling in a trance, but having his eyes open.”

And these records of his journeys are patent proofs of what God can do with a wholly surrendered life. As we close the volume every page seems to start forth and say to us : “ Reader, go thou and do likewise.”

“ My gracious Master and my God,
Assist me to proclaim,
To spread thro' all the earth abroad,
The honours of Thy Name.”



Literary Notes.

IT is possible that we shall have the privilege, in the near future, of reading an account of the important, one might say extraordinary discoveries recently made by Drs. Grenfell and Hunt at Oxyrhynchus, which is situate a few miles north-east of Abu Girga, a village about two miles from the Nile. In addition to a descriptive narrative of the discovery we may surely hope that lengthy excerpts, if not the whole of the manuscripts, will be given. It will be recalled by many that some account of these valuable ‘finds’ was given in the *Times* a few weeks since. The readers of the **CHURCHMAN** would naturally wish to have an opportunity of studying the leaves which were found and which have been described as belonging to a lost Gospel, the subject of which is a visit of Jesus with His’ disciples to the Temple, and the meeting with a reproachful Pharisee. The Pharisee reproaches the little party for their neglect of certain Jewish ceremonials which should be performed upon entry into the Temple. Jesus makes a reply, and it is His words that one is anxious to read. To what Gospel does this fragment belong? The answer will no doubt cause much discussion, and we hope that there may be no delay on the part of the travellers in the publication of their book.



We doubt if any such serious effort has been made since the publication of General Booth's “Darkest England” to penetrate the life and conditions of the very poor, as that which has been attempted by Mrs. Mary Higgs, who,