

George Howard Wilkinson.¹

BY THE REV. CANON W. HAY AITKEN, M.A.

IN two bulky volumes, Canon Mason presents us with the biography of the late Primus of the Scotch Episcopal Church. It is a wonderful story of a saintly life, and it is well and carefully told. We are all indebted to the compiler for what has certainly been with him a labour of love, and I think that few of its readers will lay the book down without feeling that it has done them good.

My object in this paper is not to give a review of the work, nor to furnish our readers with a sketch of this remarkable career, but rather to offer a few reflections upon the man and his work, with special reference to his theological position and its influence upon the age in which his lot was cast.

No more interesting and fascinating personality than George Howard Wilkinson has figured in the history of the Anglican Church of our time. His character, his work, and his whole career, were alike unique. Perhaps the same might almost be said of his theological position—at any rate, in the days when his influence was at its zenith. He was one of whom we well may say, "We shall not see his like again."

Yet he was not what would be commonly called a great man. He was a powerful speaker, and on some occasions, especially when deeply stirred, his utterances rose to a high level of true eloquence; but he would hardly be ranked amongst the great preachers of his time. No one would call him a great thinker, nor has he left any considerable mark upon the thought of the period; though no doubt he was a thoughtful man, and could express his views with force and freshness. He did not possess that originating capacity which makes a man a leader, and brings about an epoch in social or theological development. While fairly well read, he was not a learned man; nor was he a great scholar, though his style was pure and his diction singularly correct.

That he possessed remarkable powers of organization was clearly shown in every sphere in which he laboured, but probably many of his contemporaries equalled, if they did not excel him, in this respect; and the same may be said of his unsparing industry. His lot was cast in a day when hard work was by no means uncommon.

Yet, when we have recognized all these limitations, we are still face to face with the fact that he probably exerted a larger influence upon the religious life of the English Church of his period, and particularly upon the High Church element within it, than any other man of the time; and that influence is living still. If to-day there is much more Evangelical light in the High Church party, and as a consequence much more of deep spirituality, than there was a quarter of a century ago, it is probably to Wilkinson more than to any other man that this is due. And it is to be hoped that these deeply interesting volumes, with the wonderful picture that they contain of

¹ "Memoir of George Howard Wilkinson, Bishop of St. Andrews." By A. J. Mason, D.D., one of his Chaplains. 2 vols. Longmans and Co.

an absolutely consecrated life, will continue and extend that influence, so that he whose life's story they tell, being dead, may yet speak.

When we endeavour to account for this extraordinary influence, not one, but several, contributing causes suggest themselves to our mind. First, there is no doubt that his was a singularly attractive personality. There was in it a rare combination of strength and gentleness, of masculine vigour and woman-like tenderness. His true and intense sympathy, and the power of loving that was in him, along with his absolute sincerity, drew out one's heart towards him; while an indescribable charm of manner and a constant play of quiet, sober humour relieved the habitual seriousness of his tone. Those who knew him well will always retain the memory of the wonderful sweetness of his smile, and the suggestiveness of what is more than once spoken of in these pages—the far-away look in his eyes. Some men seem to carry a sort of spell of personal influence about with them, that cannot be explained or defined, and yet all who meet them, even for a quarter of an hour, are conscious of it; and he was such a man.

But there was something more—and much more important—in him than the mere charm of a particularly attractive personality. We are reminded, as we think of him, of the testimony of the Shunamite to Elisha: "Behold now, I perceive that this is a holy man of God." That was just the impression that even a slight acquaintance would leave upon one's mind, and the feeling would deepen on increased intimacy. There never seemed to be anything strained or affected about his piety, nor did it suggest the least suspicion of sanctimoniousness. It was the charm of his religious habit, that it was not put on and off, as occasion might serve; it was part and parcel of himself, and therefore it always seemed with him the natural thing. It was the realizing of "the practice of the presence of God," as Brother Lawrence calls it, in that little book that Wilkinson so much loved and valued.

Then, again, he was a man of prayer; and he believed in a prayer-answering God, and therefore expected results, and was constantly receiving what he rightly believed to be specific answers to specific requests. Hence it was no mere form with him when, at the close of an interview, he would suggest a few moments of prayer. He seemed to draw nearest to his Christian friends when they and he drew near to their Lord together; and who that had the privilege of joining with him on these occasions will ever forget the reverent intimacy, if the word may be allowed, with which he poured forth his heart in the Divine presence? It seemed sorrowfully appropriate that his last words on earth, just before the sudden end came, should have been a call to prayer, as the true way of escape from financial difficulties.

All this—his personal attractiveness, his genuine sanctity, and his prayerful habit—gave him a wonderful power in the pulpit. He spoke as in the presence of the God before whom he stood, and thus he commended himself to every man's conscience in the sight of God. Very striking is the testimony given to this by no less a person than Matthew Arnold: "Yesterday morning I went down to Belgravia and heard Wilkinson; he is a very powerful preacher from his being himself so *possessed*." Then, after speaking of the preacher's reference to himself of a somewhat self-depreciatory character, he proceeds: "You see what awful risk he ran here of being unreal, even absurd; and he came out triumphant. He was so evidently sincere, more than

sincere, burnt up with sorrow, that he carried everyone with him, and half the church was in tears. I do not much believe in good being done by a man unless he can give light, and Wilkinson's fire is very turbid; but his power of heating, penetrating, and agitating, is extraordinary."

His scathing exposure of the sins and follies of London society, and his trumpet-call to repentance, remind one of the mission of a Savonarola; and certainly the great Italian preacher can hardly have excelled him in his plainness of speech. Well do I remember how, at the consecration of Bishop Maclagan, he turned to the missionary Bishop, who was consecrated at the same service, and addressed him in such terms as these: "And you, my brother, who are going forth to your far-off field upon a scanty pittance that would hardly serve to provide a single *luncheon* in some of our West-End mansions"—thus flashing out in a few forceful words the contrast between Christian self-effacement and worldly self-indulgence more powerfully than if he had preached for half an hour on the subject, considered in the abstract.

And this was only a sample of the way in which he was ever ready to strike out from the shoulder, as the occasion arose, careless as to whether he pleased or offended, and yet, for the most part, pleasing rather than offending; for, on the whole, men like to be told the truth, even when it condemns them.

But, after all, when one has done full justice to his powers as a preacher, and to the attractiveness of his saintly, and at the same time, fascinating personality, as well as to his power with God in prevailing prayer, I cannot but feel that his influence was mainly due to the fact that, with all this, he preached the simple gospel of the grace of God, and preached as if he expected people to avail themselves of its message of peace and pardon. There can be no question that his faithful evangelistic preaching brought about something like a spiritual revival in Belgravia, and indeed, one might almost say, in the West End of London. Numbers of utterly careless, worldly people felt its influence, and turned from their sins and follies, and gave themselves to God; while no doubt a large number of "good Church-people," who had before been contented with barren Churchmanship, came to realize the spiritual import of the faith that they professed.

To many of his hearers this clear Gospel teaching had all the charm of novelty. They had sung day by day about "the knowledge of salvation," given by God to His people, "by the remission of their sins"; and yet it had never occurred to them, till they heard these simple Gospel messages from the lips of a reputed High Churchman, that they could have this blessed knowledge of salvation themselves. In one respect they were much better prepared to receive the good news, just because to them it was news. They could not be—as, alas! in Evangelical congregations too many are—"Gospel-hardened," for probably many of them had never heard the Gospel stated with any degree of clearness. And no doubt it was exactly what many of the more earnest spirits amongst them were inwardly yearning for.

Probably it was just because he was a reputed High Churchman that they lent him a more ready ear, where they would have turned contemptuously away from a reputed Evangelical; and herein may lie the Providential explanation of what might otherwise seem anomalous in his career. God, who loves us all, and watches over us all in our half-blind struggles after truth, has His own messengers for each particular class of persons whom He

seeks to reach ; and it is possible that our very intellectual or doctrinal limitations may sometimes be numbered amongst the conditions of our usefulness.

Wilkinson started his clerical career as an Evangelical, preached in a black gown, and had occasional evening Communion. Even at Eaton Square he began by celebrating at the north side ; and it was only after much pressure from his party that he adopted the eastward position. Throughout his whole career he never lost his grip of Evangelical truth, and his sermons were to a great extent simple Gospel utterances. Yet even in the early days of his first incumbency he seems to have reached the parting of the ways, and to have made his choice on the High Church side, in his acceptance of the dogma of Baptismal Regeneration, *ex opere operato*, so sturdily championed by Bishop Phillpotts of Exeter. Subsequently, at St. Peter's, his cautious but outspoken defence of auricular confession and priestly absolution left no room for doubt as to his theological affinities.

It was just this that gave him his peculiar influence with High Churchmen, and, securing for him their ear and their sympathy, enabled him to bring home to their hearts truths against which many of them had been strongly prejudiced, or of the real meaning of which they had been ignorant. Within our own times God has sent a message of marvellous power to the Roman Catholics of Italy by the lips of a friar, and to the Greek Church in Russia by the remarkable preacher who so recently passed away amidst a nation's lamentations ; and even so it would seem that He sent this unique man to the High Church people of England, and particularly of the West End of London.

To the strict logician who is also a theologian, it may seem hard to understand how Evangelical teaching can be brought into harmony with such Church views as Wilkinson was ever ready to avow. The absolute necessity of the new birth has ever been insisted upon by Evangelical preachers, from the days of the Wesleys to the present hour, and it is quite clear that Wilkinson could never have pressed upon his hearers, as Moody did, the inexorable demand, "Ye must be born again!" Nor is this a mere question of the use of words. No change can be more radical and far-reaching than one that deserves to be called a new birth ; and one would naturally conclude that he who has undergone it is indeed, and must be, "a new creature": old things will have passed away, all things will have become new. If, then, this change has already taken place in all the baptized, what room is there left for the demanding of a further change?

Old-fashioned High Churchmen, before Wilkinson's time, for the most part took up this position, and were disposed to scout the theory of the necessity of conversion, except in cases where the regenerate had lapsed into outward and notorious sin. As for the rest, they might grow in grace, and, by an ever-increasing surrender of themselves to higher influences, undergo a life-long process of conversion. This was the teaching of Bishop Forbes in his well-known brochure, "Are You Being Converted?" and, to tell the truth, it seems to me that, if the premises which he and Wilkinson held in common are admitted, this is, after all, the only self-consistent position.

But Wilkinson, although, curiously enough, he never seems himself to have passed through any such spiritual crisis, had seen what conversion could do for the godless fishermen and miners of the North ; and he could

not ignore the spiritual phenomena, nor doubt the value of the great spiritual change, which, under the name of "conversion," he had so often seen induced by the preaching of the gospel of forgiveness.

Probably, if he had attempted to give a full definition, or even description, of what conversion really means, it would not have altogether coincided with that which a carefully instructed Evangelical would have given. Very likely he would have looked upon it as the renewal of a life that had fallen into a low and dormant condition, rather than the imparting of the new and wondrous gift of eternal life. But, as it was not his habit of mind to deal in exact definitions, this did not greatly interfere with the efficiency of his Gospel teaching.

Whether such a position as his can be permanently maintained is another question. To me it seems that in the long-run logic must have its way, and that those who believe that all the baptized are necessarily regenerate will cease to urge upon them the necessity of conversion, and will content themselves with endeavouring to bring about a deepening of a spiritual life, which their theory compels them to believe is already existing, even in those who seem to show no sign of its presence.

Similarly, Wilkinson's use of the confessional would probably be so intensely spiritual that it would not practically differ much from his dealing with an anxious soul in a less formal way. I cannot believe that he could ever have pronounced absolution without having first made it plain that its validity could only be conditional, and that, unless the penitent exercised a real and heartfelt faith in Christ and His atoning death, no pronouncing of absolution by God's minister could be of any real service.

Thus this peculiarly dangerous custom would with him be rendered as nearly innocuous as possible, and would sometimes even seem to be specially serviceable. But one trembles to think of what the confessional may become in less spiritual hands, where this conditional character of the absolution is not insisted upon—nay, rather, where the absolute theory of the ordinance is dogmatically affirmed.

But enough; it is a thankless task to criticize the doctrinal imperfections, of one who lived so near to his God. If I have referred to the subject, it has been only to show that the peculiarities of his mind and temperament rendered it possible for him to maintain what he conceived to be his *via media* without any very serious loss of spiritual efficiency—at least in certain important respects.

That he was to some extent a loser, both personally and in his ministry, by the system to which he was wedded, I cannot myself doubt. I cannot peruse the pages of this life-story without feeling that, with all his holiness of life, he ought to have been a happier man than he was. Possibly this may have been largely the result of temperament; but was it not also the product of the system to which he had submitted himself?

A similar reflection suggests itself with regard to his efforts after unity, more particularly with the Presbyterians of Scotland. His large-hearted charity led him on to suggest united supplication for reunion, but the cramping influence of ecclesiasticism militated grievously against the very object for which he prayed. He was free from all the trammels to which an Established Church is necessarily subject. Bishops, and even an Archbishop,

of the English Church had shown a good example of broad-mindedness by preaching in Presbyterian churches. But this the Primus would neither encourage, nor even permit, on account of his ecclesiastical opinions. It was small wonder, therefore, if some of those whose prayers on this behalf he had endeavoured to enlist were repelled by what seemed to them a painful inconsistency.

Well, our little systems and broken lights "have their day and cease to be," but the divine beauty of a saintly life is eternal as the God from whom it proceeds; it is a treasure added to the wealth of heaven, and the memory of it enriches the traditions of earth. It remains a witness to the power of Divine grace, and a revelation of Divine glory; and such a life was the life of George Howard Wilkinson, who "walked with God; and he was not, for God took him."



Canon Fleming.¹

By FREDERICK SHERLOCK.

A LIFE which touched the two extremes of royal palaces and homeless waifs was certainly worth the telling, and many will be glad to read this account of one who was essentially a popular preacher. Happily the story has been kept within the compass of 360 pages of large type, and thus compares favourably with the conventional clerical biography, which usually runs to a wearisome length. Brief as it is, however, there are obvious signs of haste in the composition, and the presence of some rather glaring "howlers" is to be regretted. The well-intentioned farewell verses showered upon Fleming by his admirers upon his leaving Bath no doubt pleased the writers and did not hurt him, but we can imagine the pungent criticism which he would have been the first to give them had he seen them served up in all the glory of large type; while, to find the doggerel on p. 79 characterized as a hymn is a grotesque touch, singularly incongruous when met with in the life of a man who had such a keen sense of rhythm and so exquisite a taste in poetry.

The main events of Fleming's life may be put into a brief paragraph. He was born in 1830, and died in 1908. He was educated at King Edward's School, Bath, 1840, Shrewsbury School, 1846-49; he took his degree at Magdalen College, Cambridge, in 1853; was curate of St. Stephen's, Ipswich, 1853-55; curate of St. Stephen's, Bath, 1855-56; minister of All Saints' Chapel, Bath, 1856-66; incumbent of Camden Church, Camberwell, 1866-73; Vicar of St. Michael's, Chester Square, 1873-1908; Canon of York, 1877-1908; succentor, 1881-82; precentor, 1883-1908; Chaplain to Queen Victoria, 1876-80; Chaplain-in-Ordinary to His Majesty, 1901-08.

¹ "Life of Canon Fleming, Vicar of St. Michael's, Chester Square; Canon of York, Chaplain-in-Ordinary to the King." By the Rev. Arthur R. M. Finlayson, Vicar of Stoneaston. London: James Nisbet and Co., Ltd.