

## George Wither, of Bentworth.

THE subject of this sketch was born in the stirring days when the Spanish Armada was on its fateful way to these shores, on June 11, 1588, in the peaceful and typically English village of Bentworth, four miles from Alton, in Hampshire. Born, therefore, in the reign of Elizabeth, living through the reigns of James I. and Charles I., outlasting the Commonwealth, and only dying seven years before Charles II., his lot was cast in exciting times, and from first to last he remained a loyal son of the Church of England, serving her with rare courage, consistency, and devotion. This, however, is not his only title to fame. He was a poet of no mean order, and was the first to attempt the compilation of an English Hymnal. This fact alone justifies us in unearthing such particulars as we can of his eventful career.

His ancestors came from Lancaster, and settled at Manydown Manor, near Wooton St. Lawrence, and, later on, the father of the poet (one of the younger sons of the family) went to live at Bentworth, probably because it was near his wife's family—the Hunts, of Fidding Grange. Judging by some lines in George's "Britain's Remembrancer," they appear to have been in prosperous circumstances:

"When daily I on change of dainties fed,  
Lodged night by night upon an easy bed  
In lordly chambers, and had wherewithal  
Attendants forwarder than I to call,  
Who brought me all things needful; when at hand,  
Hounds, hawks, and horses, were at my command."

In the closing years of his life, which were clouded by poverty and misfortune, he must often have looked back to the easy life pictured for us in these lines.

He was educated at Colemere Grammar School under a famous pedagogue of the period, one John Greaves, and when he was but fifteen we find him in residence at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he had as his tutor John Warner, afterwards Bishop of Rochester. Strangely enough, his name does not appear in the University matriculation registers or in the records of Magdalen,

and therefore we must presume that he was admitted to residence without matriculation, there being a good deal of laxity at the time. Unfortunately, as he himself tells us, he came down without a degree. Some foolish persons disparaged learning to his father, who forthwith removed him, and he returned to his home to devote himself to agricultural pursuits. It has been thought that, as he was summoned home "to hold the plough," there had been a change in the family fortunes; but this seems unlikely, and we need not take the words too literally. The quiet life of an English gentleman of the period seems to have been unattractive to him, and there are indications in his poems that he now spent some time in travel, even finding his way to Ireland, then, as now, little favoured by the tourist. This negatives the theory that they were in straitened circumstances, for travelling was then an expensive form of amusement. Presently he settled in London, first at the Inns of Chancery, and later, as we shall see, at Lincoln's Inn. Here he gathered round him a circle of congenial friends. Among these were William Browne, of Tavistock, the gifted author of "Britannia's Pastorals"; Michael Drayton, of Atherstone, the writer of many historical ballads, and who lies in Westminster Abbey; Christopher Brooke; William Ferrar, and others; and there can be no doubt that George devoted himself more to literature than to the study of law. Not the least important result of the Hampton Court Conference, which was held while he was at Oxford, was the appearance of our Authorized Version in 1611, and it was in the same year that George Wither's first work was published, and it landed him in the first of many difficulties. It was a work entitled "Abuses Stript and Whipt"—a trenchant criticism of men and morals, which speedily brought down upon him the vengeance of the King and other persons in high places. The book was at once withdrawn from circulation, and only the intervention of the Princess Elizabeth, ever his friend and patroness, saved him from imprisonment. It was to her he dedicated his "Epithalmia," and, later on, when she was Queen of Bohemia, his "Psalms of David translated into Lyric Verse." In the year following her marriage he was, unfortunately, induced to re-

publish "Abuses Stript and Whipt," with the result that he soon found himself in the Marshalsea Prison. As might have been expected, this only served to increase the circulation of the book, which actually went through five editions in 1613, while other editions followed in 1614, 1615, 1617, and 1622. Though bounded by the walls of his prison, his mind wandered off to the scenes of his early life, and he wrote at this time his really fine poem, "The Shepherds' Hunting." This was followed by his "Satyre to the King," which, oddly enough, secured his release, probably because James felt he might be a dangerous foe, and that it was therefore wise to propitiate him. Soon after his liberation he was admitted to Lincoln's Inn in 1615, and in the same year his "Fidelia" was printed for private circulation. Only one copy of this issue remains, one of the treasures of the Bodleian Library. The first published edition appeared in 1617, and of this there are only two copies, each defective, but together making a complete copy. Wither was now considerably "in the public eye." Religious controversies were raging. There were the Romanists on the one side, and the Puritans on the other, each seeking to gain the ear and influence of James. Where, it may be asked, does George Wither come in? The answer is, he may fairly be described as a Central Churchman. The late Professor Gardiner said that he was "neither a Laudian nor a Puritan." Another of his biographers says: "He assumed a position intermediate between the Parliamentarians and the Royalists, pleasing neither for long, and eventually offending both." Of his sincerity and simple piety there can be no doubt. One of his contemporaries—John Taylor, the water-poet—declared that he had loved him for thirty-five years, because he thought him "simply honest;" and Richard Baxter called him "Honest George Wither."

His strictly religious works were numerous. He wrote "A Preparation to the Psalter," revealing an accurate scholarship; while his "Exercises upon the First Psalm" was a careful commentary consisting of over a hundred pages.

In 1623 he published his hymnbook, under the title "Hymns and Songs of the Church." It has been said that the failure of

the book was due to the fact that the King regarded it with favour! James granted him by Letters Patent a monopoly in the book for fifty-one years, and no metrical Psalter was to be bound up which did not contain Wither's work. To this there was considerable opposition on the part of the Stationers' Company and the booksellers. Wither declared that the Archbishop of Canterbury approved of the book, only requiring the alteration of one word, and many members of Convocation were in sympathy.

The first part of the book consisted of paraphrases from Holy Scripture, while the second contained hymns for the Festivals and Holy Days, also for Holy Communion, Embertide, Peace, Plenty, etc. It was the first collection of its kind, and it may justly be regarded as the forerunner of the modern Hymnal. The Puritan reaction which had set in helped, no doubt, to bring about its doom, for nonconformity, at the time, was not favourable to hymn-singing.

Wither now followed with a version of the Psalms in lyric verse, to which reference has already been made, and this was printed in the Netherlands. Again Letters Patent were issued ordering that all Bibles should have this version bound up with them. Once more there was opposition. The case was fought out, and the Lords ordered that it should henceforth be sold by **itself**.

In 1641 many of the hymns reappeared, together with others, in a further collection entitled "Hallelujah, Britain's Second Remembrancer." Orlando Gibbons had contributed to the former book some really fine tunes, but there were none for this book. This compilation is in three parts: (1) *Hymns Occasional*, for use at different times, as when waking, dressing, washing, on leaving home and returning, on recovery from illness, etc. As there are over a hundred hymns in this section, it is impossible to enumerate them all. Then come (2) *Hymns Temporary*, hymns or poems for special occasions: for Rogationtide; for the Nativity, the Circumcision, Epiphany, Lent, Palm Sunday; for the Saints' Days; for a birthday; for the anniversary of a marriage, etc — sixty hymns in all. Then come (3) *Hymns Personal*, for special occupations: for a physician, a patient, a courtier, a husband-

man, a merchant, a musician, a schoolmaster, etc.; for special circumstances—for a blind person; for a poor person; for a prisoner, for a cripple, etc.; indeed, there is extraordinary variety. In this section there are sixty-two hymns. The last is entitled "The Author's Hymn for Himself." Its closing verse will serve to show the spirit of the writer, as well as to give an example of his favourite metre:

"And with Israel's royal singer,  
Teach me so faith's hymns to sing  
So Thy ten-stringed law to finger,  
And such music thence to bring,  
That by grace I may aspire  
To Thy blessed angel choir."

Of course, in such a collection, many of the compositions are of unequal value, and the style is often stiff and archaic; but, taken as a whole, these little-known compositions are of a high order, and undoubtedly all his best religious poetry is here gathered together.

The closing years of his life were sad in the extreme. When the Civil War broke out, he sold his estate and raised a troop of horse for the Parliament. He was in 1642 appointed Captain and Commander of Farnham Castle, now the residence of the Bishops of Winchester. After holding the castle for a few days with a small and insubordinate force, he left for London. Though he stoutly maintained that he had acted under orders, he was accused of deserting his post, and his private residence was plundered. He was granted £2,000 in compensation for his loss, and for the next eighteen years of his life he was mainly engaged in the task of trying to get this money. In this he does not seem to have been very successful, and it is questionable if he ever got more than £700 of it. Poverty aroused in him a spirit of rebellion and discontent, and he made free use of his facile pen to air his grievances, until people almost entirely forgot his earlier and better work, and grew tired of him and of the unending stream of pleas and prophecies which he poured forth.

During the closing years of the Commonwealth he resided at Hambledon, in Hampshire, and for a time he seems to have enjoyed the favour of Cromwell, but he forfeited it after having

told the great Oliver "truths he was not willing to hear of." But other troubles awaited him. His sudden appearance in London at the time of the Restoration aroused the suspicion of the authorities. His apartments were searched, and a manuscript poem found among his papers, "Vox Vulgi," gave great offence. Once more he was imprisoned, but in 1663 he regained his liberty, and resumed his voluminous writing. He had already seen one visitation of the Plague in 1625, and graphically described the terrible scenes he witnessed in "Britain's Remembrancer." He was destined to see two other and greater calamities—the Great Plague of 1665 and the Fire of London. Needless to say, he did not lay down his ever-ready pen at such a time, and his last literary work was the production of "Fragmenta Prophetica," consisting of extracts from his prophetic writings. But the candle had begun to flicker, and he passed away, at his house in the Savoy, on May 2, 1667, having lived his long and strenuous life under no less than eleven Governments. Like the best of men, he was not without his faults. He was impetuous and wilful, declining to be guided by others, and this wilfulness brought upon him many troubles from which he might otherwise have escaped. He had an unhappy knack of irritating. In quieter times it might have been less exasperating. Still, his faults were not vices, and he has left an absolutely clean record. His devotion to his wife and his love for all that is pure and beautiful are pleasing to read of in an age in which marital affection was sneered at.

S. R. CAMBIE.

