

THOMAS KELLY : EVANGELIST AND HYMN-WRITER.

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ALTHOUGH, as we shall see, some of his hymns are well known, it is probable that comparatively few people know much about Thomas Kelly. As his name indicates, he was an Irishman, born in Dublin on July 13, 1769—that is to say, nearly a hundred years later than Dr. Isaac Watts, and about fifty years later than Charles Wesley. His father—also Thomas Kelly—was a Judge of the Court of Common Pleas, and the son in due course entered Trinity College, Dublin. After taking his degree he went to London to read for the Bar, and entered the Temple. His conversion, however, led to his abandoning the legal profession and he was ordained in 1792. He now came into touch with the revivalism which was then making itself felt, and caught its spirit. Eloquent, cultured and fervent, his preaching attracted large numbers of thoughtful people. Unfortunately, those were days when earnestness was at a discount, and the activities of Kelly and his friend Rowland Hill, brought down upon them the wrath of Dr. Fowler, the then Archbishop of Dublin, who inhibited them from preaching in his Diocese. This closed to him the pulpits of the Established Church, but of course it did not stay his witness. It was indeed an excellent advertisement, and Kelly became from that time a sort of free lance and enjoyed considerable popularity. He continued to minister for a time in Dublin, preaching in a building known as Bethesda and in a hall in Plunket Street. The ill-advised action of the Archbishop served to alienate him and his followers from the Church, and finally he severed all connection with it and gave himself up to itinerant Evangelistic work.

Henceforth it is a little difficult to locate him ecclesiastically. Soon after his secession we find him in close touch with the founder of "Brethrenism," but later on he seems to have struck out on a line of his own. Possessed of ample means he erected at his own expense preaching-houses in different places. The sect he thus formed died out eventually, but so long as he lived, and acted in the capacity of superintendent of the congregations, his popular

gifts and the attractiveness of his personality kept the Kellyites, as they were called, together. It is worth noticing that another Irish hymn-writer, John Walker, who was born in the same year (1769), had a very similar career, a Fellow of the T.C.D. and in Holy Orders, he, too, seceded and became head of a sect known as the Walkerites. This shared the fate of the Kellyites in a short time. Kelly's generosity, enthusiasm and humility won for him the admiration of many who did not at all agree with him. He does not seem at any time to have officially connected himself with any nonconformist body—he was one of those men who cannot easily be whittled down and fitted into a denominational candlestick,—and we find him, to the very last, maintaining friendly relations with Evangelical Christians inside and outside the Church. As he lived to be 85 (dying in 1854), he witnessed the uprise and development of what is known as the Irish Revival, had some share in it, and when too old to do much, rejoiced over what God had wrought.

He was one of a small group of men with whom my maternal grandfather, Jonathan Willington Walsh, of Walsh Park, Birr, who had in early life been in the Navy and had served under Nelson, came to be associated. This group included James N. Darby, at one time a clergyman, but who seceded and eventually founded the "Darbyites" or Plymouth Brethren, Joseph Denham Smith, a Congregational Minister, the Revivalist for whom Merrion Hall, Dublin, was built on the lines of Spurgeon's Tabernacle, and lastly, but not least, C. H. MacIntosh, better known as "C. H. M.," whose Notes on Genesis, Exodus, etc., attained a wide circulation. I believe the materials for these "Notes" were being gathered together when he was living in my grandfather's house, tutoring my uncles for the Army. He was certainly one of the earliest and ablest exponents of the principles of the "exclusive" brethren. Most of these men had gone to their rest before I was born, but I have heard my mother tell of hearing Thomas Kelly preach in the conventicle he had erected at Athy. Of "C.H.M." I have a very distinct recollection—a very alarming person I thought him—and I remember his once asking my mother, in my hearing, if she was a Churchwoman, and if she intended to bring me up in that faith. When she replied in the affirmative, he said, "I am afraid, Mary, you are in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity." I can-

not have been more than eight or nine, and I do not think I understood in the least what he meant (I wonder if he knew himself?), but I know I thought it was something horrible, and I am afraid that in my childish soul I hated him!

I could say much about the fruits of "Brethrenism" in that one family, but I forbear. Those who want to know more should read Mr. Edmund Goss's story in *Father and Son*. Mine would be a similarly tragic tale, though it is only fair, I think, to the memory of my grandfather to say that he severed his connection with the "Brethren" when J. N. Darby took upon himself to excommunicate Benjamin Wills Newton, who admitted Evangelical Christians of any denomination to the "Breaking of Bread." Thus began the division into two hostile camps—the "open" and "close" Brethren. It is a sad story of jealousy and ill-feeling and the feud has continued to this day. It is perhaps worth recording that B. W. Newton (another ex-Episcopalian clergyman, and a man of great ability), retired to Plymouth, where he established his great "meeting" which gave rise to the sobriquet "Plymouth Brethren." I hope I may be pardoned for this digression.

To return to the subject of this sketch. It is as a hymn-writer that Thomas Kelly will be best remembered. As the writer of the article on him in Julian's *Dictionary of Hymnology* observes, his compositions have never received the consideration to which they are entitled at the hands of editors. To Victoria, Lady Carbery belongs the credit of having made more use of them than any compiler in recent years. His best known hymns are: "The head that once was crowned with thorns," "We sing the praise of Him who died," and "Through the day Thy love has spared us." These have found a place in practically every modern hymnal, and they belong to that class that may well be headed "Treasures." Mr. Ira D. Sankey included in *Sacred Songs and Solos* his charming hymn, "Look ye Saints, the sight is glorious," and several other collections have followed suit. He has left us a fine Easter Hymn:—

"Hark, ten thousand voices sounding
Far and wide throughout the sky,
'Tis the voice of joy abounding,
Jesus lives no more to die."

How often at Missionary dismissals have we sung:—

“Speed Thy servants, Saviour, speed them;
Thou art Lord of winds and waves.”

This, too, we owe to him. There is an abundance of sweet consolation in his “Hark! a voice! it cries from heaven.” Here is the second verse:—

“All their toils and conflicts over,
Lo they dwell with Christ above;
O! what glories they discover
In the Saviour whom they love!
Now they see Him face to face,
Him who saved them by His grace.

We have a beautiful hymn for a Vesper:—

“Of Thy love some gracious token,
Grant us Lord before we go;
Bless Thy word which has been spoken;
Life and peace to all bestow.”

He boldly departed in many of his hymns from the ordinary metres—C.M., S.M., and L.M.—then so much in vogue, and was certainly not unsuccessful. The characteristic of his hymns is the delightful setting forth of the Glories of Jesus. Here, for instance, is the last verse of his hymn, “Who is this that comes from Edom?”:—

“Mighty Victor, reign for ever;
Wear the Crown so dearly won;
Never shall Thy people, never
Cease to sing what Thou hast done.
Thou hast fought Thy people’s foes;
Thou wilt heal Thy people’s woes.”

He wrote altogether 765 hymns, more than Dr. Wyatts, but fewer than Charles Wesley, who is said to have written 6,500! John Wesley, by the way, died in 1791, the year before Kelly’s ordination, while Charles Wesley passed away three years before, so that it was only indirectly that his ministry was affected by the Methodist movement, but, like Watts and the Wesleys, he published several collections of hymns. The first of these, containing 247 hymns by various writers and 33 of his own, in an appendix, appeared in 1802. This was followed by another in 1804, which went through several editions, while a further collection of hymns hitherto unpublished, was printed in 1815, and finally all his hymns were printed in one volume in 1853. Lovers of hymns who are able to procure a copy will not regret the search for it which may be necessary.