

WESLEY AND IRELAND.

BY THE REV. PATRICK K. HORAN.

THE well-known Irish writer, D. L. Kelleher, in his book entitled *The Glamour of Dublin*, makes a reference to John Wesley, "the great, gloomy Evangelist," as he describes him. In a brief impressionistic note concerning Wesley's visit to the old Lutheran Preaching House at the corner of Talbot and Marlborough Streets, Dublin, Mr. Kelleher quotes the great Itinerant as writing among the first entries in his *Journal* for Ireland,

"At least ninety-nine in an hundred remain in the religion of their forefathers; nor is it any wonder."

Here this Irish Roman Catholic places a full stop, producing thereby such an ambiguity as to be unjust to the spirit and message of the Founder of Methodism.

Readers of Wesley's *Journal* are familiar with the words that he wrote under date of Saturday, August 15, 1747, almost a week after his arrival in Dublin.

"I stayed at home and spoke to all that came; but I found scarce any Irish among them. At least ninety-nine in an hundred of the native Irish remain in the religion of their forefathers. The Protestants, whether in Dublin or elsewhere, are almost all transplanted lately from England. Nor is it any wonder that those who are born Papists generally live and die such, when the Protestants can find no better ways to convert them than penal laws and Acts of Parliament."

There spoke not only the shrewd observer and discriminating scholar but the generous lover of the souls of men. Truly this was a man who could, with all sincerity of heart and honesty of purpose, preach on the Catholic Spirit.

Almost two years after this entry with reference to the native Irish, he penned in Dublin, on July 18, 1749, his *Letter to a Roman Catholic*, which is surely one of the most beautiful and graciously Christian contributions to the controversy. His whole soul, it is evident, was animated with a desire to do good to all men, and the voice of a saint and a scholar speaks with touching Christian charity and courtesy in every line of that noble and appealing epistle so eloquent of a truly Christlike spirit.

"I do not suppose," he writes in the course of the *Letter*, "all the bitterness is on your side. I know there is too much on our side also. So much that I fear many Protestants (so called) will be angry at me, too, for writing to you in this manner; and will say, 'it is showing you too much favour; you deserve no such treatment at our hands.'

"But I think you do. I think you deserve the tenderest regard I can show, were it only because the same God has raised you and me from the dust of the earth, and has made us both capable of loving and enjoying Him to all eternity: were it only because the Son of God has bought you and me with His own Blood. How much more, if you are a person fearing God (as without question many of you are) and studying to have a conscience void of offence towards God and towards man?"

Wesley adds in the gentlest fashion: "Come, my Brother, and let us reason together."

He had strong convictions, and was fully assured in heart and mind of the truth of the doctrines he preached, yet he knew how to speak the truth in love, a by no means common accomplishment, especially in that age. His tender regard for all men, his gracious attitude to Roman Catholics did not prevent his endeavouring to show them the grave errors in their teaching and practice. As evidence of this fact we have the testimony of his long and extraordinarily active life and ministry. In his second letter to Bishop Lavington (1750) concerning this very point we read:

"It is true that for thirty years past, I have 'gradually put on a more catholic spirit'; finding more and more tenderness for those who differed from me either in opinions or modes of worship. But it is not true that I 'reject any design of converting others from any communion.' I have, by the blessing of God, converted several from Popery, who are now alive and ready to testify it."

It may be said in all truthfulness that John Wesley summed up the chief reason for the failure of the Reformation in Ireland when he wrote:

"The Protestants can find no better ways to convert them than penal laws and Acts of Parliament."

From the beginning of the Reformed Church the attitude of dislike and hostility manifested by the clergy and laity generally towards the native Irish, their language and customs, alienated the people from the Reformed Faith. The Gaelic tongue was proscribed and the Gospel preached in a language not "understood of the people." Nor would the responsible authorities of the Reformed Church in Ireland countenance the use of Gaelic in the worship of the Church. The famous scholar and divine—James Ussher—who was Primate of all Ireland in the seventeenth century, described preaching and catechizing in the Irish tongue as "castles in the air."

Something of the profound and far-reaching importance and effect of this hostile attitude to native culture may be gauged from the fact that even at the close of the eighteenth century and the opening of the nineteenth out of a population of five millions about four millions still spoke the Gaelic language.

In the earlier years a Wesley would have understood and acted in the best interests of the Kingdom of God.

Dr. Bedell—that saintly English Bishop of an Irish diocese—a contemporary of Ussher, realized something of the significance and portent of the grave spiritual conditions and said that the Roman priests had the advantage "of the language, the possession of the people's hearts."

In this connection one is reminded of St. Luke's account of St. Paul's arrest in Jerusalem. It is a vivid picture the sacred writer draws for us. Paul stood on the stairs of the castle after his arrest and "beckoned with his hand unto the people" and

"spake unto them in the Hebrew tongue. And when they heard that he spake in the Hebrew tongue to them, they kept the more silence." Therein lies a parable of tremendous significance.

At a time when they were despised, their customs ridiculed, their ancient laws mocked and their language regarded with contempt, the priests of Rome spoke in that language to the hearts of the people, holding them against the Reformed Faith, so poorly represented indeed that the Reformation became identified in the minds of the Irish people with anti-nationalism, oppression and tyranny. The English-speaking preachers, therefore, were looked upon not as heralds of the Gospel, but as emissaries of despotism and pillars of the new Imperialism. The pity of it all, and the tragedy for two nations whom God surely meant to be the truest of friends when He encircled them with the mantle of the sea and drew them close together.

In the darkness, however, there shone light though ineffectual. Dr. Bedell loved the people. He was a true Bishop and shepherd of souls. He had a zeal for the extension of Christ's Kingdom in Ireland and laboured much to bring the Gospel to the people. In this, however, he was not encouraged but actively and unceasingly opposed. His very devotion in the service of Christ became an object of suspicion and ill-will. This prelate secured the assistance of native Gaelic scholars in translating the Holy Scriptures into the vernacular, but having completed his holy task and labour of love the strongest opposition came from the Irish Primate and Archbishop Laud. As a result the MS. remained unprinted for half a century.

In the meantime Rome was strengthening her hold upon the affection and loyalty of the race. The Reformed communion stood aloof as a small, select company, an alien and unsympathetic group. Rome, on the other hand, was quick to seize this opportunity and so "lengthened her cords and strengthened her stakes" throughout the land. Thus she has made "Faith and Fatherland" a symbol of passionate loyalty among Irish folks across the world. The Evangelical Revival came with a different spirit, but too late for the majority of the race. The evil had been wrought, and the iron was entered into a nation's soul.

Wesley himself was not, of course, familiar with the Gaelic tongue, but the catholic spirit of this great, little man communicated itself to his Preachers—the saddle-bag Itinerants of Ireland. By reason of this fact they were enabled to reach many souls who would otherwise have remained unsought and untouched.

It is certain that the Father of Methodism would not have found himself in agreement with an Act passed in the twenty-eighth year of Henry VIII which provided that "all spiritual promotions should be given only to such persons as could speak the *English tongue and none other.*"

Gideon Ouseley—that wonderfully Apostolic Preacher of early Irish Methodism—was a most eloquent and appealing Gaelic speaker. He writes during the year 1800 :

"The Roman Catholics attended us from place to place; nor could any person prevent them from coming out to hear us. The fame of Irish speaking has spread through all the country, as we speak some Irish every night. Numbers of convictions and conversions took place."

The late Rev. Wm. Arthur—best known perhaps for his strangely moving book *The Tongue of Fire*—was a biographer of Gideon Ouseley and tells, among many others, one incident which shows the influence which the Gaelic preaching of the Methodists exercised even at such a late date.

"As the shoeless creatures, who had been praying and making offerings (at the holy wells), perhaps for the forgiveness of sins, perhaps for the recovery of a sick cow, straggling in little groups along the road, they would expect to exchange a courteous 'God save your honour!' with the gentlemen on horseback; but were probably surprised when the horses were reined up, and 'broadcloth' began to talk to 'frieze' in the kindest tones and in the best Irish. They did not suspect heresy in that tongue; indeed, probably, they believed that Satan himself could never speak it. Therefore their ears were open. They were told of One who loved the like of them so much that He came from heaven to seek them, and that He would forgive all their iniquities and heal all their diseases.

"They fell on their knees, smote their breasts, and with uplifted hands and streaming eyes called upon God. They would almost adore us," says Graham (companion of Ouseley). "We had hard work to prevent them from kissing our feet."

The later tragic history of Ireland might well have been written along different lines had there been, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such men as those to speak to the heart of the Irish Celt. But alas! the reformed Church of that age in Ireland knew not the day of its visitation nor the things which belonged to its peace.

Some words of Wesley himself addressed to his preachers may well be remembered in our own days:

"You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore, spend and be spent in the work. And go always not only to those that want you but to those that want you most."

The Speaker's Bible has already provided preachers with a most useful type of commentary in which are brought together the results of much of modern scholarship. The last volume issued deals with the first ten chapters of St. John's Gospel. It contains a useful introduction by Dr. J. A. Robertson, and the sub-sections on such subjects as Law and Grace, the Nature and the Worship of God, and From Faith to Certitude, are ably considered by Dr. J. H. Morrison and Dr. W. M. Grant. The notes on the various chapters supply a quantity of useful material drawn from many sources and adequately supply a preacher's needs. An index of volumes of sermons and other references is added, making the volume a valuable addition to any library.