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Presbyterian Memorials

by Thomas Witherow

[Introductory chapter to his book *Historical and Literary Memorials of Presbyterianism in Ireland.*]

Among the Presbyterian Churches of Christendom, that of Ireland is numerically small, and for the general public it may lack the historic interest which attaches to some sections of the family of God in other lands; but a writer need not be suspected of the narrow sectarian spirit which exaggerates the importance of its own party, and overlooks the excellence of all else beyond, should he decide to restrict himself to the study and exposition of matters affecting the religious community with which, as it happens, he is best acquainted.

To present anew the facts of our story in any regular and scientific form, is not by any means the object of the writer. Such a service is not required in presence of that well-known book, “Reid’s History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland,”—the one great literary work which has done credit to our Church in this country in the first half of the present century. But that is no reason why there should be no endeavour to approach the subject from a different side, and why a little novelty of matter and form may not be employed in the laudable hope of exciting a deeper interest in such inquiries, and especially of making the public better acquainted with a class of men whose influence, it is admitted, has done something to make Ulster what it is to-day. A literary and biographical history of Irish Presbyterianism must call attention to matters which deserve investigation for a variety of reasons, more particularly for the indirect light which they reflect on the general history of the Church and nation.

The general literature of a Church, though not, strictly speaking, the primary source of its history, usually supplies an accurate index of its social and religious condition. A varied, a learned, and voluminous literature is a sure indication of wealth, culture, and literary leisure. A scanty and a feeble crop of publications, generally speaking, is a sign of poverty, persecution, want of time, want of culture, or want of means. As an ecclesiastical community rises in social importance, its intellectual activity is usually quickened, and as education spreads

and readers multiply, the productive power of its ablest minds receives a stimulus which gives promise of good results. This accounts for the double fact that the Presbyterianism of Ireland, in a literary point of view, has been comparatively barren in the past, and that at the present there are various symptoms of a change for the better. For two centuries ministers and people were both engaged in a struggle for existence, and had little time to think of anything that was non-essential thereto. The nineteenth century has removed the incubus of ages. Now we breathe freely, and can look forward to the future with hope.

The writings of our ministers for two centuries are in the main sermons, essays, pamphlets, treatises: works seldom rising to the dignity of volumes, and often called forth by the circumstances of the time. This fact, which deprives them of a permanent and general interest, makes them more valuable in an historical point of view. They reflect and perpetuate the feeling of the time when they were produced. They corroborate the most important statements of the general history. On them every great political and religious movement of the time, has left its deep ineradicable mark. The Plantation Settlement, the civil wars of the Commonwealth, the Restoration, the Revolution, the Penal Acts of the eighteenth century, the descent of the Pretender on the Scottish shores, the Volunteer movement, the Rebellion of 1798, and the advent of the milder and more beneficial legislation of the nineteenth century, are all registered so indelibly on the local and fugitive publications of the time, that they cannot be effaced. Not only so, but the various phases of religion which have appeared among the Ulster population for more than two hundred years, can be there traced clearly. The doctrinal orthodoxy of the seventeenth century, the rise of error, the schisms, the growth of scepticism, the progress of new parties and sects, and the attempt to rise to a new and higher religious life, all find their record there. It was seldom the most important truth which was the subject of the hour; but the thoughts regarding that subject which filled the minds of the ministers and people of Ulster, were always sure sooner or later to find expression in the fugitive publications of the time. So much is this the case, that if Reid's *History* was not in existence, and the MS. Minutes of every Synod, Presbytery, and Congregation had perished, it would be possible from the local contemporary literature to produce a new history, true in all its main features, though of course defective in many connecting links and interesting details.

But it is the reverse of this that is the more likely to occur. The history will survive, long after the pamphlets and other publications which corroborate it shall have perished. Already it is feared that many of them have actually been lost—at least, none can tell where all of them are to be found. Such as do exist are mostly deposited in libraries, where they are accessible to a little effort, but where, as a

matter of fact, most people never see them. It is only some industrious collector, of rare antiquarian tastes, who has ever seen more than a very few of them. We would earnestly desire to bespeak the reader's favour for those rare old pamphlets in which so much of the past life of the Church is embalmed; we would persuade him when they fall in his way, to save them from destruction, to handle them gently, to collect them carefully, and to deposit them in some public institution, where they may to some extent be protected from the accidents of life and the ravages of time. The literary taste and the corporate spirit of a religious community must both be very low, if it cease to deserve the praise of being *non incuriosa suorum* (not uninterested in themselves).

Further, the story of a human life, provided there is something to tell, and that something be fairly told, ought always to be attractive. But a double charm should attach to the biography of men who lived in former times in the very spot where we live now, who breathed the same air, gazed on the same hills and valleys and streams, mingled in the same society, proclaimed the same doctrines, met the same difficulties and trials, and felt themselves surrounded by the same influences as we do at the present hour. One main use of history is to enable every new generation to profit by the experience of the past; but it is not easy to see how any past experience can profit us if we do not take pains to learn what it was. And can any experience be of so much advantage, as that of men who were placed in circumstances the most closely resembling our own?

The plan which we have chosen deprives us of the power of selecting our men. To take up every minister who has published anything within a certain definite period, necessarily obliges us to speak of some of the best and of some of the worst of the order; for authorship is not always the characteristic or evidence either of piety or worth. The result is, that while we speak of some good men, we pass in silence many more, who in every moral and intellectual qualification were their equals, but who are unrecorded here simply because they left no printed record of themselves; and we are under historical obligation to introduce a few others who have perhaps little that is spiritual or moral to recommend them. And yet the lives of Such men are not without utility. They, too, carry in them a moral from which the young may learn to beware. They are beacons set up to warn us that the early hopes which youth and talent often inspire may all be shattered by the loss of faith, by want of principle, by weakness of character, or by immorality of life. Such lessons have their value, and for the sake of giving the reader an opportunity of gathering them occasionally, we pass by without regret many better men, who faithfully performed the duties of their station, and who, after doing service to their generation, fell asleep in honour. The plan adopted, therefore, leaves no room for selection; we must take our men as they present

themselves; but for this reason those whom we notice are the more likely to be on the whole a fair sample of the Presbyterian ministers of Ireland.

The philosophy of history has its value for speculative minds, but its vague and sometimes unsupported generalizations seldom make any deep impression upon the people. Nothing fastens on the popular understanding like a concrete fact, told in the words of the man who was present at the time and place when the thing occurred. No one is so likely to state the sentiments of a party with accuracy, as the man who himself entertained those Sentiments. Such facts and opinions are the nearest approach, save and except official records, which can now be made to the sources; and there is a pleasure and utility in opening up to some extent the very springs of history, that each may come, fill his own pitcher, and carry it away. With this object in view, we have allowed each of our men, so far as our limited space permits, to tell what he saw, what he believed, what he thought on the various matters that were of concern to him, and in regard to which he has left a written record behind him. With some, that record, like a figure made on the sand at low water, has already been swept away by the tide of time; in case of others, it is a deep inscription on a rock, sure to hold out against the rain and storm for centuries to come. But our wish is to gather and treasure up these literary relics of the past, lest after times should not have the same opportunities as we have. We could wish, in our love of the subject, to give a photograph of each man's face, and of the old edifice in each locality where he and his people worshipped more than a hundred years ago; but that is obviously beyond our power. As the pencil, except in the case of a very few, cannot now be brought in to aid our object, all that the pen can do is to make each person stand out with a little more individual distinctness than before, and put on record all that we have been able to gather in regard to his history, his principles, and his character. Were it within our power, we would connect each man's name with the locality in which he laboured, so that when the one should be named the other would instantly be called to remembrance, and thus we would invest, if we could, every district in the land with venerable ecclesiastical memories of its own. But a writer's wishes are often ahead of his capacity. We must rest content even if we can do no more than interest younger men and women in the story of the past, and make them better acquainted with a few of the men who laid the foundations of the Presbyterian Church in this country, and who instructed the various generations of their ancestors in the things of God; men, whose office was, and whose practice in the main corresponded to their office, to

“Allure to brighter worlds, and lead the way.”

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