



Fire and Ice Sermon Series

<http://www.puritansermons.com/>

Robert Blair, M.A. (1623-1634)¹

Minister of Bangor

by Thomas Witherow

[From his book *Historical and Literary Memorials of Presbyterianism in Ireland.*]

1. *Autobiography of Blair*: [contained in 11 Memoirs of the Life of Mr. Robert Blair,," printed for Andrew Stevenson, writer, Edin., 1754. 12mo., pp. 128.] Reprinted by the Wodrow Society, Edin., 1848. (M.C.D.)
2. *Preface to Durham on Scandal: Letters: and a few Latin Poems.* [Not printed in a separate form.] (T.W.)
3. Unpublished MSS. supposed to be lost --
Answer to Hall's Remonstrance. [Written in 1641.]
Annotations on the Book of Proverbs. [Written in 1666.]

Robert Blair was born of a respectable family at Irvine, in Ayrshire, in the year 1593. His father died when he was a child; and he, with five other children, was left dependent on his mother. So early as his seventh year he became the subject of religious impressions, and was admitted to the Lord's table at the age of twelve. In 1611, he entered the University of Glasgow, where he graduated in 1614; and two years afterwards was appointed a Professor, or Regent, as the office then was called, in that seat of learning.

The attempt which was then being made under the auspices of Government to give a prelati form to the worship and polity of the Church of Scotland forced itself upon the attention of Blair while engaged in college, and especially when visiting the more eminent ministers at vacation time; and he early resolved, at all risks, to give it every opposition in his power. His views on Church government were very decided, and his opinion that the domination of one minister, called a prelate, over other ministers, his brethren, is contrary alike to the letter and spirit of the Divine Word, grew to be a rooted conviction. Archbishop Law and Dr. Cameron, Principal of the University, having failed to

¹ The years of his ministry in Ireland.

persuade Blair to comply with their measures, the Principal contrived to warp him in controversy, and to make his position so unpleasant, that he resigned his situation as teacher of philosophy and left Glasgow.

On the invitation of his countryman, Lord Claneboy, he arrived in Ireland in 1623, and in the same year was settled as parish minister of Bangor, with the consent of patron and people. To make the Prelatic Establishment of Ireland more acceptable to the settlers then passing over in large numbers from Scotland to occupy the waste lands of Ulster, the king had filled the northern sees with Scotsmen who had themselves conformed. Echlin was then Bishop of Down, and Knox, of Raphoe; and these prelates were not at first too rigid in exacting conformity from their countrymen, in hope, no doubt, that under new influences their objections to prelacy would wear away. Echlin was well aware of Blair's opposition to Episcopacy and to the Liturgy of the Establishment; but, with the design of meeting his scruples, the Bishop, in the character of a presbyter, joined Mr. Cunningham, of Holywood, and other neighbouring ministers, in bestowing upon him Presbyterian ordination. The Bishop himself proposed this method of avoiding the difficulty, adding, good-naturedly, "I am old, and can teach you ceremonies, and you can teach me substance." As no conditions were imposed upon him, and as he was left free to instruct the people and conduct public worship in the Presbyterian form, Blair did not think it right to decline the opportunity of usefulness thus presented, and accordingly became connected with the dominant Church.

For a short time all went smoothly. Blair, in Presbyterian fashion, had elders and deacons appointed, preached four times in the week, visited the families from house to house, and took pains to instruct all the people of his charge, of whom there were no less than twelve hundred who had reached maturity. Moreover, he held intercourse with other earnest ministers in the district, took an active part in the monthly meeting which Mr. Ridge instituted at Antrim; and notwithstanding that there mingled with the elements of his spiritual nature a tinge of the superstition from which few men in that age were altogether free, his warm piety and sound judgment contributed not a little to foster the good and to check the extravagances which manifested themselves in the religious movement, that commenced at Oldstone in 1625 and spread into the surrounding districts a few years after.

At this point a change began to show itself in the Bishop. At the end of some years, Blair and the ministers with whom he acted were as much attached to Presbyterian forms as at first; besides, they were growing in popularity, and were successful in their work. Echlin henceforth evinced a disposition to exact rigid conformity, or, failing that, to drive them out of the Establishment. In such a state

of mind, he was not unlikely to be accessible to evil reports, and to give to them more credit than they deserved. He was told, and no doubt believed, that Blair and the other ministers taught that bodily sufferings were necessary to conversion; and the result was that in 1631 he suspended four of them—Blair among others. Owing to the interference of Archbishop Ussher, who was then primate, this censure was removed; but henceforth the old bishop grew much more exacting, and in 1632, when the ministers again refused to conform, he deposed them. Various attempts, among others a journey which Blair took to London to lay the case before the king, proving ineffectual to obtain for them anything but forbearance for a little, the sentence was confirmed, and Blair was deposed and excommunicated in November, 1634. Mr. Dunbar, of Larne, shared in this condemnation; the only offence laid to their charge being that they refused to conform to the rites and ceremonies of the Episcopal Church.

The first thought of Blair and his friends was to leave the country, and to settle in the colonies of North America, then open to the persecuted. To accomplish this, they built a little vessel, called the *Eagle-wing*, at Groomsport, in which several ministers and laymen, who were no more enamoured of the domination of the prelates than they themselves were, embarked, to the number of 140. But great hardships were encountered' on the voyage, and when they had almost reached the coast of Newfoundland, they were compelled by stress of weather to return to Ireland. After this unsuccessful attempt at departure, Blair lived for a little near Belfast, and preached occasionally in private houses; but when information was given that he was exercising his ministry secretly, notwithstanding his deposition, orders were issued by the authorities for his apprehension. Timely warning of this enabled him to escape, and he took refuge in Scotland in 1637.

Having obtained permission from the authorities to settle in his native country, Mr. Blair became minister of Ayr in 1638, and sat as a member of the famous Glasgow Assembly which met in November of that year. In 1639, the Assembly, much against his own wish, transferred him to St. Andrews. When a detachment of the Scottish army under Major-General Munro was stationed at Carrickfergus, and the country had in some degree quieted down after the rebellion of 1641, he was sent over by the General Assembly to preach in the spiritually destitute districts of Down and Antrim, and he noticed with sorrow the religious declension, which after an interval of a very few years was then evident among the people. In 1643, as chaplain to a regiment, he accompanied the Scottish army into England, and was present at the battle of Marston-Moor. He was moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1646. The duties of that office brought him into acquaintance with Charles I. in his

misfortunes, who liked him perhaps as much as it was possible for a man of his tastes to like a Presbyterian minister, and on the death of Alexander Henderson he appointed him as one of his chaplains. From his office he had to preach before the King on Sabbath, and conduct worship twice a day in the Royal presence, while His Majesty remained with the Scottish army. During his intercourse with the unfortunate monarch, he ventured, to give him much good advice, which of course was thrown away upon a man who had made up his mind to take his own course. Still he had grown to love the infatuated prince, and never could bring himself to regard his execution in any other light than that of a horrid murder.

His opinion of Cromwell, on the contrary, was not very high. Of late the custom has been to laud the Protector, and to speak of him as a sort of demi-god—the uncrowned king of England. But men of good judgment, who lived in his own time, and knew him, personally, did not speak of him in such flattering terms. Blair had met him at Marston-Moor; and afterwards when he came to Edinburgh, he and David Dickson and James Guthrie were sent to him on some ecclesiastical business. Cromwell made to them a fair flourish of words, shed tears on the occasion, and frequently appealed to God to witness his sincerity. When they came out, Dickson said, “I am very glad to hear this man speak as he does.” “Do you believe him?” said Blair. “If you knew him as well as I do, you would not believe one word he says. He is an egregious dissembler, and a great liar. Away with him! He is a *greeting devil*.”

Blair survived the Restoration, and was ejected in 1662. The Council of State, at the instigation of Archbishop Sharp, in whose way he stood at St. Andrews, removed him from his congregation and imprisoned him, in order that the new-made prelate might have room to carry on his operations without risk of disturbance. His last years were spent in retirement. He often repeated the fourth verse of the twenty-third Psalm, and the seventy-first was such a favourite with him that he often called it his own Psalm. He died at Couston Castle, in the parish of Aberdour, on the 27th August, 1666; and a stone erected on the side wall of the old Church in that parish marks the grave of one, of whom Baillie testifies that “he had a high reputation among his contemporaries for prudence, wisdom, and moderation,” and who holds the first place among the fathers and founders of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

Blair was twice married; on the first occasion to Beatrix Hamilton, a young lady in Edinburgh, who died in 1632, at the early age of twenty-seven; and secondly, to Catherine Montgomery, daughter of Viscount Montgomery of the Ards. This lady had two sisters married to ministers, one to Mr. Cunningham of Holywood, the other to Mr. Hamilton of Killileagh; while to the credit of the lady herself she had the courage to marry Mr. Blair in 1635, after he had been deposed

and excommunicated by the bishop. By her, his name has been transmitted to more recent times: the poet Blair, author of “The Grave,” was his grandson, and the Lord President Blair, and Dr. Hugh Blair, author of the well-known “Lectures on Rhetoric,” were his great-grandchildren. [If Chambers (see *Traditions of Edinburgh*, p. 85) is right in his conjecture, a son of the subject of the present sketch was a merchant in Edinburgh in 1696.]

The writings of Blair are not very important. A few fugitive *Latin Poems* which he has left, testify merely to his skill in that language. His *Answer to Bishop Hall* was finished in 1641, but was never published, and is now supposed to be lost. The same has to be said in regard to the *Annotations on Proverbs*, which occupied him in the last years of his life. With the exception of a *Preface to Durham on Scandal*, and a few *Letters* of no consequence, the only work of his remaining is the *Autobiography*, or sketch of his own life, which he commenced in 1663, but did not live to complete. Though it is a mere fragment of his story, commencing at his birth and breaking off abruptly at his abortive attempt to reach New England in 1636, it is of intense interest to all who care to know anything of the introduction of Presbyterianism into Ireland.

None of his works, was written in Ireland. The *Preface to Durham* is the only part of his writings printed in the Author’s lifetime. The *Autobiography* was repeatedly copied, and used by different writers; but after lying in MS. for ninety years, it was first published in 1754 by Andrew Stevenson, writer in Edinburgh, who has the merit of calling public attention to an important document; though he seems to have misconceived the duties of an editor, and to have taken strange liberties with his text. The first accurate edition ever published was that of the Wodrow Society in 1848, which is edited by the younger M’Crie, and issued after a collation of various MSS. It is from this work that the various facts now mentioned, as well as the extracts, are taken. [Blair’s *Autobiography*; Reid’s *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*, vol. i.]

State Of Ulster In 1623.

The most part of the considerable lands in Ireland were possessed in ancient times by the English; but the civil wars in England, between the Houses of York and Lancaster, did draw from Ulster (the northern province of Ireland) the able men of the English nation, to assist their own faction in their wars at home. Hereupon the Irishes in Ulster killed and expelled the remnant of the English out of that province, and molested all the rest in Ireland—Ulster being, in their conceit, like the thumb on the hand which is able to grip and hold against the four fingers, Leinster, Munster, Connaught, and Meath. The civil war ending in the beginning of the reign of King Henry VII., the suppressing of the Irish rebels was not much laboured by the English, partly through sedition at home, and partly through wars with France and Scotland, till the reign of that happy and excellent

Queen Elizabeth; who, as she was a blessing not only to England, but to all the Reformed nations and kirks in Europe, so she did much to finish that rebellion, which yet was not fully extinguished (the Scot West-Islanders sometimes joining with the Irish rebels, and sometimes acting for themselves against the English) till King James, of famous memory, his receiving the Crown of England. These wars lasting so long, the whole country did lie waste: the English possessing some few towns and castles, making use of small parcels of near adjacent lands; the Irishes staying in woods, bogs, and such fast places. In the reign of King James that desolate land began to be planted both reign with English and Scots, the northern Irishes remaining not only obdured in Popish superstition and idolatry, but also in their idleness and incivility. The part of Scotland nearest to Ireland sent over abundance of people and cattle, that filled the counties of Ulster that lay next to the sea; and albeit amongst these, Divine Providence sent over some worthy persons for birth, education, and parts, yet the most part were such as either poverty, scandalous lives, or at the best, adventurous seeking of better accommodation, set forward that way. The wolf and wildcain were great enemies to these first planters; but the long rested land yielded to the labourers such plentiful increase, that many followed the first essayers. Little care was had by any to plant religion. As were the people, so for the most part were the preachers. This was the main cause of my unwillingness to settle my abode there. -*Autobiography*, pp. 56, 57.

Harvest At Bangor.

But I cannot forget that memorable passage that occurred to me in the second year of my ministry in Ireland. There being a great crop upon the ground, the harvest proved very bad, especially in that parish which was very large, being six miles of length, and the most part of it good arable land. The soil being for the most part strong clay, fell out ordinarily to be later ten or twelve days than the neighbouring places. They had got in the most of their corn ere the weather brake; but after that for a whole month there were Bo great rains that in the parish of Bangor there could be no inning. Whereupon we resolved solemnly, by humiliation and fasting a whole day, to seek His face to avert the threatened famine. When the day appointed came, great rain was poured out from morning to evening, so that the Lord at first seemed to answer us by terrible things, thrusting out our prayers. I had before that day conferred with the most ancient and expert husbandmen in what case their corns were. They answered that the whole was in great danger by reason of the great growing in the stacks, almost a finger long, and that if the weather fell out never so good, the third part would be lost. But our gracious God was pleased that night, after the day of our humiliation, to send so mighty a drying wind. which blew full twenty-four hours, that houses were in danger of being overthrown, and some were in effect blown down, All the corns were so thrown down and fully dried, the growing thereon snibbed, that in two days following, the people labouring night and day without intermission, the whole corns were got in. These two days I, with two neighbouring ministers were continuing our supplications. -*Autobiography*, pp. 62,63.

Monthly Meeting At Antrim.

When he (James Glendinning, lecturer at Carrickfergus] had retired as he had promised to me, to preach at Oldstone, there he began to preach diligently, and having a great voice and vehement delivery, he roused up the people, and wakened them with terrors; but not understanding well the Gospel, could not settle them nor satisfy their objections. Within a mile to that place lived Mr. John Ridge, a judicious and gracious minister, who, perceiving many people on both sides the Six Mile Water. Awakened out of their security, and willing to take pains for their salvation, made an overture, that a monthly lecture might be set up at Antrim, and invited to bear burden therein Mr. Cunningham, Mr. Hamilton, and myself. We were glad of the motion, and hearkened to it at the

very first, and came prepared to preach. In the summer day four did preach, and when the day grew shorter, three. This monthly meeting thus beginning continued many years, and was a great help to spread religion through that whole country. Sir Hugh Clotworthy was very hospitable to the ministers that came there to preach. His worthy son, now Lord Viscount Massareene, together with his mother and lady, both of them very virtuous and religious, did greatly countenance this work. -*Autobiography*, pp. 70, 71.

Bodily Affections At Larne.

There being many converts in all these congregations, the destroyer set himself mainly against the people of Lough-Larne by this stratagem—he playing the ape did upon some ignorant persons counterfeit the work of the Lord. In the midst of the public worship these persons fell a mourning, and some of them were affected with pangs like convulsions, and daily the number of them increased. At first both pastors and people, pitying them, had charitable thoughts, thinking it probable it was the work of the Lord; but thereafter in conference they could find nothing to confirm these charitable thoughts—they could neither any sense of their sinfulness, nor any panting after a Saviour. So the minister of the place did write to some of his brethren to come thither, and with him to examine the matter. Coming and conferring with these persons, we deprehended it to be a mere delusion and cheat of Satan to slander and disgrace the work of the Lord. And the very next Lord's-day one of my charge, in the midst of the public worship, being a dull and ignorant person, made a noise and stretching of her body. Incontinent I was assisted to rebuke that lying spirit that disturbed the worship of God, charging the same in the name and authority of Jesus Christ, not to disturb that congregation; and through God's mercy we met with no more of that work, the person above-mentioned remaining still a dull and stupid sot. All this was so notoriously known, that Primate Ussher got word of it; who the next time I saw him, said to me, I had reason to bless the Lord, who had assisted me go confidently (as he was pleased to word it) to conjure that lying spirit.—*Autobiography*, p. 89.

The Ill-Starred Voyage.

The cordage being gotten, the faint-hearted man (the captain) pretending there was a dangerous leak in the ship, prevailed, with us to go to the Kyles of Bute, there to search our leak; but there we perceived the leak was in himself. The Lord's intent was that some people there, in Bute and Cowan, should hear the word of God from us, where also we received from them the, beat commodities afforded, as apples, honey, and the beat sort of bread they had. Our ship was here put so fast on ground, that for sundry days she did not float. This being done by the treachery of the master, we therefore dismissed him, having another more experienced than he to take the charge. So at last the time being far spent, the - day of August we thence get forth, being in all, besides their sailors, about one hundred and forty, having beside our sea provision two years' victual for the land. In the entry we met with this discouragement, a deal of our bread not well baken was spoiled, so that we behoved to cast it overboard. We were so eager for our purpose, for which we had prayed so much, that we could not, or rather would not, see the Lord crossing our designs. Having through calmness hardly passed the Sound of Ratchly in the Mull of Cantyre, the Lord sent us a fair and strong gale of wind for many days. When we had passed the back of Ireland, and entered the great ocean, O what mountains—not waves—of sea did we meet! The swellings of the sea did rise higher than any mountains we had seen on the earth, so that in the midday they hid the sun from our sight. Then fell I sick, being troubled with a great thirst, so that I could eat nothing but roasted apples, till at last some of our company persuaded me, holding me by the arms, to visit

all the passengers in their several quarters. In one of them I was urged to take some stomach water, which with God's blessing proved effectual to my health. —*Autobiography*, pp. 107,108.

Link to the Next Chapter

Visit *Fire and Ice: Puritan and Reformed Sermons* at
<http://www.puritansermons.com/>