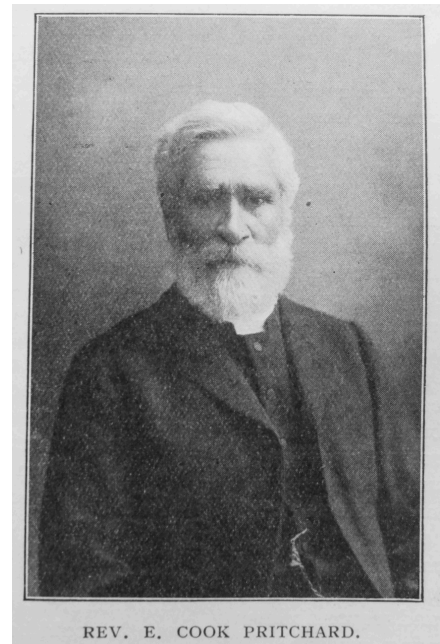


Memories of a Pioneer - Rev. E. Cook Pritchard

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THE Rev. E. Cook Pritchard has done good service in devoting himself to the production of a book containing recollections of many years spent in the service of our Church at the Antipodes. "Under the Southern Cross" came into the hands of the writer a few days ago, and it is sufficient proof of its quality that it was not laid down until it had been read from cover to cover. As its author makes no pretensions to the possession of great literary skill he will learn without pain that it was not on account of its illustration of such skill that it held attention captive. Indeed, the book is capable of much improvement so far as arrangement and expression are concerned. But it does contain a story, and possibly the very absence of literary art may have compensating advantages. Mr. Pritchard sets forth his facts without any decorative dressing, and the thrill with which we read them is not caused by tricks of style, but by the facts themselves. After all, no man "gets you" quite so certainly as the plain man who forgets his varnish brush, always presuming he shows you the right stuff, and Mr. Pritchard does *that*.



"Under the Southern Cross" is a rapid review of Mr. Pritchard's ministry in Australian Primitive Methodism, but it is more than that. The story of our Church on the underside of the world, of its heroic missionaries and of their struggles and triumphs is not half so well known as it ought to be, and Mr. Pritchard's work, though not exactly history, will be of distinct value as helping the readers of the ordered narrative still to be written into the "atmosphere" in which they ought to pursue its study. This, however, is not its only right to a welcome. We can conceive that the volume will be popular as a book of "adventures," while many will value its pages for the pictures of early colonial life so artlessly but effectively painted by their writer. Mr. Pritchard has seen strange sights and his book has the fascination that always attends the narrative of the man who has "been there." Australia, Tasmania, New Zealand—he has wonderful memories of them all. He has mingled with squatters, gold diggers, aborigines, convicts among whom he has seen marvellous proofs of the power of the gospel he has lived to preach. We are grateful to be permitted to share his recollections.

"The Rev. M. Lupton has been here wanting to see you." These were the words in which, one Monday afternoon, more than fifty-four years ago, good Mrs. Simmons, of Monkton Street, Ryde, greeted her lodger on his return from a Sabbath spent "in gloriously successful gospel ministrations" at West Cowes. The lodger was Mr. Pritchard, and his reply to the greeting was: "Mr. Lupton wants me to go to Australia." So it turned out, though the answer to the landlady was given as a result—shall we say?—of telepathic communication from mind to mind, and not in consequence of any previous intimation. There was the inevitable young lady to be consulted, and the following interview took place. "I said, 'Are you willing to go with me to labour for Christ and humanity in Australia?' She answered, 'I am prepared to go with you anywhere God may call us to labour or suffer for Him.' Dear sainted soul!" So the matter was arranged, and, after visiting the Jubilee

Conference held at Tunstall, the two young folk sailed away in the *Irene*, a barque of but four hundred tons. Other passengers were Rev. W.J. Dean, his wife and son and daughter, Rev. Elijah Greenwood and his wife, and Rev. W.H. Dalton. Of this devoted band our friend alone remains on earth; his young wife soon found a grave in the strange land. The ship was small and mean, but the missionaries thought of the poor Sabbath school children trudging thousands of miles through mud and frost and snow to collect the farthings for "their own Australian missions," and were well content to rough it in the interests of such an economy as this noble toil deserved. It is an interesting picture and, when compared with things as we know them, seems to belong to another age.

Of the voyage and the welcome "down under" we are told but little where we would have been glad to learn more. Passing over two chapters, in which is epitomised the history of the beginnings of our churches in Australia and New Zealand, we are bidden to consider the spiritual conditions of Bush life in Tasmania, to which wild land our young couple had been appointed. Forty miles from Hobart on the noble Derwent river lay the district of Port Esperance, and there, having persuaded the skipper of a small trading cutter to give him a passage, Mr. Pritchard was landed one fine Saturday morning just as day was breaking in a dense forest of giant eucalyptus trees of heights ranging up to four hundred feet. A terrible place so far as moral and spiritual conditions were concerned this Port Esperance seems to have been. Most of the people lived in a state of concubinage, for there was no one to marry them, no one to baptise, no one to bury their dead. Sunday was the market-day of the neighbourhood, and our preacher held his service in the ballroom of a hotel lent willingly by a landlord who seems to have been better than his trade. Of course, Mr. Pritchard did "a round of family visiting," and it is not given to many men to be able to tell two such stories of visitation as he tells of that day's labour. One of these introduces us to an old woman who had never heard the name of Christ for six years, and who could not speak for weeping when she heard the question "Do you know Jesus?" for she had known and loved Him all the time. The other—but here the writer's own words shall be given:—

"The room I entered was fairly well furnished for a bush house. After a sympathetic chat, in which I heard a tale of trial and bereavement, reading Scripture, and prayer, I rose to leave. The woman walked with me to the verandah, and pointing to a mound at the bottom of the garden, said, "Do you see that mound, sir? Twelve years ago I buried my husband there. He left me with a family of small children. This place was our own then, but I have been compelled to mortgage it to buy bread for my children. Last week it was sold by the mortgagee, as there were several years' interest due which I could not pay, and next week I have to leave, and then the bones of my poor husband will be dug up and thrown about like the bones of a dog.' She turned into the home she was to leave so soon, unable to speak another word, and I left as the lump rose in my throat, praying our loving Father to bottle her tears." It is satisfactory to read the sentence with which this page comes to a conclusion: "Thank God, I was enabled, after my return to Hobart, to arrange for the settlement of a schoolmaster at Port Esperance to teach the children and to conduct regular religious services. These are the essentials of every community.

From such a picture as the preceding one turns to find with thankfulness that the rough life was not without its touch of humour. In a section on travelling occurs the following reminiscence of journeys by the four-horse coach running between Hobart and Launceston:— "Twenty minutes were allowed for a meal. On stepping down from the coach a most polite waiter met us. 'Now, ladies and gentlemen, this way to the cloak-room; after your dusty ride you will enjoy a wash and brush down.' Two brushes only and eight or ten passengers to brush down, so that by the time we had finished our toilet and got into the dining-room the coach was ready to start again, and the guard would come hurriedly, saying, 'Now ladies and gentlemen, all aboard, the coach is just starting.' On looking

through the window you saw the horses rearing and prancing while the driver was apparently doing his utmost to hold them while shouting , 'Quick, gentlemen, or you will be left behind.' This bit of comedy was repeated again at dinner time. I soon saw that this was a bit of acting, and instead of being led to the cloak-room on arrival at the breakfast and dinner hotel, I made straight for the dining-room, and, without waiting for carvers or waiters, I would seize a knife and fork and help myself to the best that was provided. On entering the room I had paid my two shillings and sixpence, so I resolved I would have something for it. . . It is astonishing how soon a man learns to adapt himself to circumstances."

This account of ministerial shrewdness shows the parson to distinct advantage. However, he needed to have his wits about him for other purposes than those of foiling the sharp practices of "mine host." It was quite the usual thing on that coach line to put an absolutely unbroken horse into harness on the theory that the other three horses of the team would soon teach him his duty, a custom which often enough had startling results, as Mr. Pritchard saw with his own eyes. He has known, too, what it was in the rainy season to be called with his fellow passengers from a comfortable seat to plunge into a morass to give the coach a push. It cannot be a particularly pleasant thing, after standing up to the thighs in muddy water, to find your boots full of blood, "for many of the swamps are full of leeches and they take their toll."

But the leeches of the swamps were not the only dangers the traveller had to face in those days. The bushranger was still abroad in the land, and if Mr. Pritchard had not the doubtful privilege of meeting these gentry himself, he knew many who could tell strange tales of sudden and uncomfortable encounters. Here again, like *Oliver Twist*, we want more. We would have been glad had our author given a further selection from the budget of that driver of Page's coach who told him so many stirring tales. The one given is worth quotation. A mounted bushranger, splendidly horsed, leaped into the track and, presenting a revolver, called upon Page's man to "bail up." Instantly, with an unerring stroke of the long, heavy thong at the end of his four-horse whip Jehu cut the fellow across the eyes, and as the end of the lash curled about his assailant's head, dragged him out of the saddle and laid him blind and quite helpless on the ground, where, fearing that the man might have mates, he left him. "But suppose you had missed your mark, his eyes, he would certainly have shot you, and probably all on board the coach," said Mr. Pritchard to the teller of this story. In answer, the driver pointed to a fly on the back of one of the leading horses of his team. " 'Do you see that fly?' Before I had time to answer him he had brought his whip round, and with the thong had cut the fly from off the horse's back." After telling this story it was hardly necessary for Mr. Pritchard to add that "ravellers needed to be wide awake in those days."

Exciting as these narratives are, it is in the proofs furnished again and again of the power of divine grace to save the worst of men that the chief charm of Mr. Pritchard's book will be found. In all the pages of Harold Begbie there will not be found a more wonderful and dramatic story than is here related of two ticket-of-leave folk, Isaac and Rebecca Newton. Isaac was a little man who boasted his descent from the philosopher whose name he bore, and Rebecca was "an amazon from Wales." Isaac's courtship had consisted in inspecting a line of female convicts submitted to him for approval or rejection, as he went out "on ticket," the custom being that any woman prisoner so wooed and won would also be allowed her liberty. At first the prospects of the couple had been good. They cleared a piece of good land and, as they both worked with a will, prosperity resulted from their toil. Then came the opening of the Minmi Mine and a tavern—the latter within a few hundred yards of Newton's farm. In all the district there was no place of worship of any kind, and the tavern had it all its own way. Gradually an acquaintance was formed with the landlord, who was a genial, chatty man.

So came the ruin of Isaac and Rebecca. Here is one passage from Mr. Pritchard's account of these people: "On one occasion, after a long bout of drinking, Isaac, in a fit of delirium tremens, rushed down from the 'Red House' to the wharf and jumped into the river to drown himself. Rebecca was pacing the front verandah of the public-house sucking her long 'alderman' clay pipe, apparently an uninterested witness of the scene. Some sailors who were working at the wharf rescued him and steadied him for a while until he could stagger towards the 'Red House,' Rebecca all the while unconcernedly smoking her' pipe. After some time, and with great difficulty, Isaac managed to reach the top of the steps of the verandah, when Rebecca rushed up to him and, landing him a terrific blow in the face with her right fist, laid him flat on his back at the bottom of the verandah steps, saying, or rather hissing, 'I will teach you to drown yourself' " This lesson had its desired effect. Better still and, most wonderful to relate, this abandoned pair were won to God at the opening services of a small weatherboard sanctuary when Mr. Pritchard was the preacher. Rebecca became the precentor of the new church, and Isaac became the trust steward. A family altar was set up in their home, which became from that day a place of praise and thanksgiving. It is a marvellous story among other marvellous stories and reminds one of chapters in the Acts of the Apostles.

As for the rest of this deeply interesting volume, we have not the space to quote half the passages we would be glad to present. There is the story of the atheists and the camp meeting. There are narratives of wonderful interpositions of providence. Especially is there the story of George Wilson, who had been sentenced to be hanged for shooting a coastguardsman in a smuggling encounter, and whose sentence had been commuted to transportation for life. This story alone would make any book worth buying, for this same George Wilson so prospered in business and rose in general esteem as to be elected successively councillor, alderman, trustee of the public library, mayor of the city, a member of the Legislative Assembly, and justice of the peace for the whole colony. Here we must make an end, content to hope that the reader will secure Mr. Pritchard's book and read it for himself.

References

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