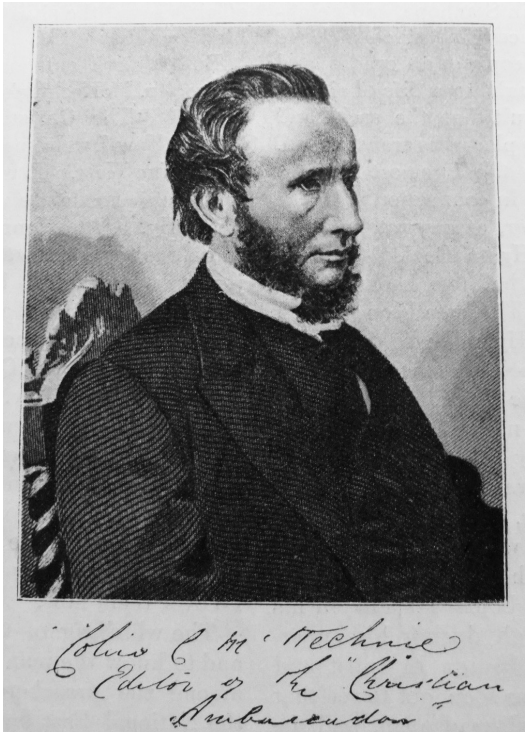
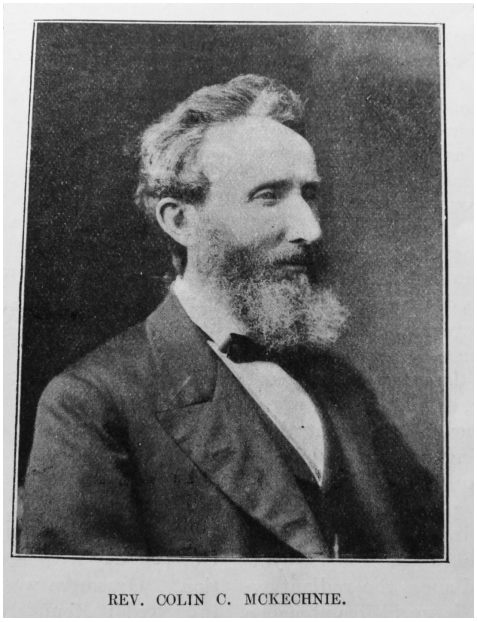
Reminiscences of Great Preachers
Rev. Colin Campbell McKechnie

Transcription of Sketch in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by A Septuagenarian



I had known Mr. McKechnie by name for several years before I knew him personally. Reports had been published (one from his own pen) of a remarkable revival in Stanhope and neighbouring places in which a large number of people of all grades and classes had been brought to a life of righteousness, with the result that the social and religious aspect of the place was transformed. In this work he was the foremost worker. I next knew his name in connection with the somewhat fierce (bitter, at any rate) controversy over the new Hymn Book issued in 1853. Before that we had two books in one, "large and small." The small one was, I surmise, the original Hymnal; so that when the preacher announced the hymn, he said Small Book or Large Book, whichever it happened to be. The need of a new Hymnal was admitted by every one. The preparation of the new book was put into the hands of Rev. John Flesher, Connexional Editor. I speak of Mr. Flesher with profound respect for the splendid work he had done; nor can I forget the pleasant hours I spent in his house near Scarborough during his superannuation. He was benign in spirit and gracious in address, you soon got to see that he was a cultured, well-read man, and he spoke in soft musical tones, but certainly he was not a born poet. He inserted several of his own hymns, some lines of which would barely score, nor could they be sung. But what was worse, he tampered with some of our most popular hymns, and, as I then thought, mutilated them. No one seemed to know what was being done till the book appeared. Instantly a storm arose, chiefly in the North of England where a strong committee was formed to deal with the matter, with Mr. McKechnie as secretary. It was not difficult to discern his handiwork in the circulars issued, copies of which I was able to get. The feeling was strong, and for a time the outlook was threatening. But Mr. Flesher's bearing was admirable, and the conciliation of Mr. Petty and other prominent officials saved the situation, and so the storm blew by.

But a more outstanding event made me know Mr. McKechnie's name - the publication of "The Christian Ambassador" in 1854. How I welcomed it in my quiet abode in the Far West. It was modest in its contents and moderate in price – eightpence quarterly. At Connexional headquarters there was for a time a fear that it would injure the magazine, but this fear proved illusory. I must not attempt to tell the story of its origin, nor trace its growth into the present excellent "Quarterly Review" so ably edited by Rev. H.B. Kendall, B.A. This was one of the many ways in which Mr. McKechnie quickened the intellectual life, not of the Sunderland District only, but of our Church at large. How I wish that I had preserved those early numbers of the "Ambassador," how much I should like to go over them now.



REV. COLIN C. MCKECHNIE.

The whirligig of time brought me to see and to know the man who had been my hero among the preachers. On the occasion of the National Fast during the Indian Mutiny I was appointed to officiate in a certain place on a week-day afternoon. We were singing the first hymn when I saw three gentlemen striding down the aisle. The first and last I knew, but who was the middle one of the three? He was erect as a column, and he fixed his eye upon me in a steadfast gaze; he did not so much look at me, as into me; I had never felt so searched into before – who could he be? I soon got to know, for Mr. Gibson came up to the pulpit and said that if I liked Mr. McKechnie would offer the first prayer. "Oh," I said, "won't he come and preach?" "No," was the reply, "we have taken the liberty to ask him, and he won't." "No liberty," I rejoined, "do bring him." I was in a pitiable plight when I called upon him to pray. Among his other gifts Mr. McKechnie had the gift of public prayer; so unconventional, so direct, so felicitous in expression, so fervent in spirit. What good it did me; it led me to God and broke my snare of the fear of man; I threw myself upon God's help. For the time my hero became like an ordinary man.

The subject was Joel ii. 13, "Rend your heart, and not your garments." I had made full preparation and had liberty in preaching. At the close he met me with the most cordial greeting and by kindly insistence prevailed upon me to spend the evening with him on "The Hill," where quite a large company sat at the "social board." Of that company he was the bright particular star; not that he monopolised the conversation, nor was he a *raconteur* in the ordinary sense, though he could tell a story with good effect, or vividly describe a scene, or set forth a humorous situation. This, however, was not his forte; his soul loved a friendly argument, philosophical, literary, or theological; here he was a master, and any one who encountered him must look well to his harness. The bent of his mind was to prove all things; indeed one might say that his *metier* was that of the critic, but always in a sense of large and luminous fairness. That evening began my friendship with one of the half-dozen best and noblest men I have known during my long life.

He was superintendent of the Crook Circuit at that time, though he lived at Bowdon Close. I went over to see him and took with me my newly acquired copy of Conybeare and Howson on St. Paul, and was lauding it, when he went to his shelves and brought Jowett's two volumes on Galatians and Thessalonians saying, "Your book is useful on Paul from the outside; here is a masterly work on Paul from the inside." That hour was my introduction to Jowett. Let no one think of him as a disciple of the Master of Balliol, but he made me see the acuteness and suggestiveness of the Master's comments. I was also introduced to the work of other writers and thinkers.

Mr. McKecknie was a true Scot, though not a perfervid one. His name is of Highland origin, a sept of one of the Clans. He invariably sounded the slight guttural in his name — Kechnie. I had ample means of knowing how familiar he was with the great historical epochs of his native country: the early struggles for national independence, the Reformation and Covenanting periods. He was also well versed in Scottish ways and customs. In conversation I expressed my wonder as to the

composition and taste of the Haggis. “Your wonder shall cease,” he replied, “I will tell you what it is, and more than that, we will have one for dinner.” Here was a man who could discuss with competence the philosophy of Sir W. Hamilton, Reid, and John Stuart Mill and then give his housekeeper directions how to make a Haggis – “Great Chieftan o’ the Pudden’ race,” as Burns in his well-known poem designates it. It has been my fate or my fortune to partake of this delicacy many times since, but this was my first experience. If it is, as Dr. Hill Burton affirms, “a transcendantly Scotch dish,” it came from France, where it was known as *hagish* - minced meat.

He did not shine as a “popular preacher,” his temperament did not lie that way; besides, when his dyspeptic troubles were on him preaching was no small difficulty. Not built for “popular occasions,” he shone brightest in his ordinary ministry. In fair health and in good mood he could rouse and move an audience as few preachers could. His themes off the beaten track, the richness of his vocabulary (tinged with Johnsonian elevation), his fruitful thinking, and above all his spiritual force, made the service not so much a “feast of reason ” as the “very gate of heaven.” I can recall some of these themes and seasons, but space forbids description. I can only refer to what must, I think, have been the most fruitful period of his ministerial life, his labours in the North Shields Circuit. It was so wide that it was no misnomer to describe the preachers as “travelling preachers.” Wide as it was, over the whole area there swept the breath of Divine Life. There was no extraordinary machinery set up, nor were there many what used to be known as “Protracted Meetings,” the Revival was not “got up,” it “came down”; it was of God and not of man. Preachers, laymen, people all, worked with a will; they joined hands because they had joined hearts. Several of Mr. McKechnie’s colleagues remain unto this day, and a few laymen, who did yeoman service, Mr. John Joplin, an ardent and untiring worker, Mr. W. Crawford, Mr. John Roseby, and others. For some time the spiritual temperature had been rising, and instances of conversion were frequent, but it was not till the autumn of 1867 that the first extensive outbreak took place, on which occasion I happened to be present. The school room beneath Saville Street Chapel, North Shields, covers the same area as the chapel itself, and was filled with people on that Wednesday evening ordinary service. There was a spirit of expectation abroad as might have been seen and felt, yet no noise or demonstration. I noticed Mr. McKechnie’s face, it had the look of one who bore the burden of the Lord. The text was not what one would call a “Revival’’ text; but he had by prayerful anticipation diagnosed his congregation. Job xxiii. 6 was the subject. “Will He plead against me with His great power? No; but He would put strength in me.”

It was apparent that he had not the abandon of utterance he frequently had, but I can avouch that every sentence went home like a well aimed arrow. I shall not attempt an outline of this remarkable sermon, though I remember it very well. The central thought was that so far from God contending against the contrite sinner, He was on the sinner’s side; He would heed his cry and put strength in him. Yes, even now I see his earnest face and hear his pleading voice, nor did he plead in vain. The scene in the prayer meeting afterwards was one never to be forgotten: twenty men and women kneeling at the “penitent form,” among whom was Mr. McKechnie’s own younger daughter. Now that I am recalling the scenes of that great and gracious work I must refer to another meeting in which I took part. It was only the usual Friday night prayer meeting which Mr. McKechnie was “planned ” to conduct. To use the old term there was an *unction* in the opening prayer that lifted us up to the “heavenly places.” I cannot stay to describe the scene that night. If the one spoken of was quiet, this one was noisy and lasting on to ten o'clock, There were alternations of singing and prayer, such as you only hear on occasions like this, blended with strong crying and tears, and shouts of

salvation from I know not how many. I have used the old phrase, “penitent form,” but that night every form was a penitent form. I had seen my friend in positions of honour, or on the platform where he swayed a host of people as the wind sways the trees of the wood, or in the pulpit when in the mood he preached in power, or in debate, or in company, where I admired him, but never as on that night when I saw him stepping over form after form among the people struggling in the pangs of the second birth, pleading with them, striving to lead them into the way of peace, the falling tear bespeaking the intense sympathy of his heart, and anon the radiant expression of joy which lit up his countenance and the exclamation of praise when the struggler realised his conscious acceptance with God. The spiritual birth-rate that night was high; I cannot say now how many were “born there.” To see him like a skilful general lead a “procession” through the streets down to the Quay filled me with admiration and joy. The streets resounded with the singing of an inspired host led by that king of precentors, Mr. Richard Raine, who knew every hymn and every tune, and whose voice and pitch never failed. Such “rings” were formed on the Quay or in Milburn Place, some one was called to speak, perhaps Mr. Joseph Salkeld or Mr. Nightingale. The glory of the Lord was there! Mr. McKechnie’s erect figure was always in the front; his eye was quick to see what to do, and his voice was heard encouraging and stimulating all present. He was an excellent tactician. He had the courtesy of true gentleman. His colleagues were his friends and brethren. He never played the part, “I am superintendent.” To the poor and needy he was tender-hearted, and in a quiet way practically generous. He made no fuss about what he did. I was several times his almoner, with injunctions not to tell whence the help came. There was an excellent woman, Mrs. T., a widow, with whom for some years the battle of life went pretty hard, but this winter the stress was unusually severe; she was too independent to publish her need. On the day before Christmas of, I think, 1867 he was many times impressed that he should go and see Mrs. T., and as the day waned he felt he must go. He found her in her one room with (to use the common phrase) not a penny, nor bite, nor sup, and here was Christmas Eve. How different the Christmas was from the one she had dreaded, and that by his help; God had sent him.

But for the ill odour which has gathered round the term I should say that he was the prince of boon companions in company, at an “outing,” or excursion. I can only refer to one. He joined four or five of his friends in a tour through a portion of the Lake country. Our last day lives specially in my recollection. Grasmere was “done” in the morning, Rydal Mount (the poet’s home since 1813) was visited, we had sat in Wordsworth’s pew in the Parish Church, had stood uncovered at his grave in the churchyard, and at Hartley Coleridge’s, a few yards away. Then we rode up to Keswick, and saw the “sights” there. In the evening we rowed down the Derwentwater, and clambered up the Falls of Lodore, when someone attempted to “spout” Southey’s jingling rhymes, ‘‘How do the waters come down at Lodore?” amid the jeers of the rest. The gloaming of a glorious summer’s day began to gather, and we pulled back, drawing inshore to heat the echo clearly responsive to our calls or snatches of song, and then made for our quarters. All through Mr. McKechnie had been our moving spirit. His banter, his humorous sallies, his argumentation on poets and poetry which at times provoked discussion, at other times evoked laughter. It was a season never to be forgotten. Nearer eleven than ten o'clock we retired. It fell out that I had to share his room. As we entered he saw a Bible on the table which he avidly seized, saying, “O blessed Book; sit down, let us dip into it.” More by chance than design he opened it at Psalm ciii., and read to verse 14. What a revelation of divine forbearance, pitifulness, and mercy. We prayed and went to the deep, undisturbed, renerving sleep of tired but happy men.

What boots it to say, even to hint at limitations, what is it but that he was a man? My own conviction is that his powerful personality, his virile intellect and extensive reading, his wide and generous sympathies, his Connexional enthusiasm, his devout spirit, his genial address and literary work, made him, perhaps, the most influential minister in the ranks of the Primitive Methodist Church in his time.

References

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