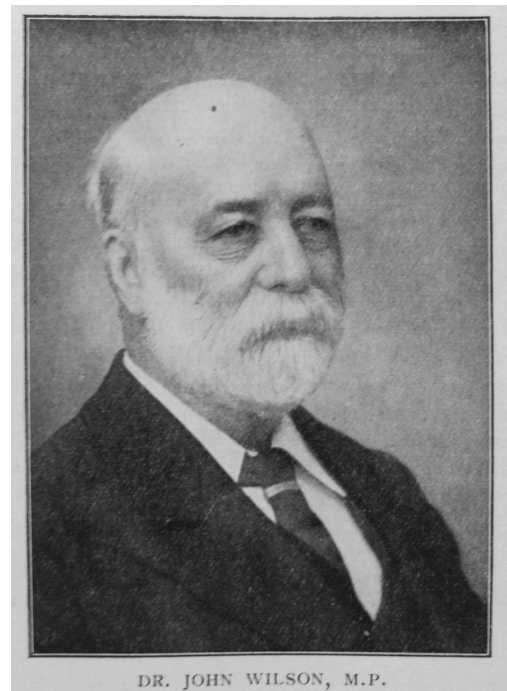


John Wilson M.P.

Transcription of obituary published in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by J.G. Bowran

ON Wednesday morning, March 24th, Dr. John Wilson entered the heavenly life in his sleep. On the following Saturday, amid unprecedented signs of sorrow and respect, he was laid to rest in St. Margaret's Cemetery in the city of Durham. Never in all the years has such a gathering been seen in the famous old city. Parliamentarians, captains of industry, university heads, distinguished civilians of all ranks, many of the greatest labour leaders in the land and thousands of working people assembled to pay the last token of veneration to the noble-hearted leader. The scene was at once solemn and magnificent. It was the popular confession of the sovereignty of a man. When Emerson was dying, he caught sight of Carlyle's portrait hanging on the wall. "*That is the man, my man!*" he whispered. So the thousands thought as they remembered the wondrous ways in which John Wilson had touched their lives.



His career was romantic in the highest degree. Think of this poor boy coming to such eminence and influence! We have read his autobiography, the simple, wise, devout and humble disclosures of all his years. He did not know that he himself was pure romance. His life-story is one of the glories of the nineteenth century. Imagine the boy, motherless at five, fatherless at twelve, facing the hard, rough life of the times, first in the mines, then on the sea, here in England, then in India, victimised as an agitator, black-listed in the county, refused work, driven to America, drawn back to his beloved Durham and to his old-time pit friends, and then coming to leadership, first locally and then in wider places, ever ascending, until he came to the top, *the* leader of the miners of his county, their spokesman in the greatest Parliament in the world! We are reminded of some words of his in his "Memories." Speaking of his parentage, he said: "There was no glamour of a great name about my family. It was lowly. What matters it? The essential and true estimate is what we are ourselves. It is the finish that counts and not the start." Verily, he has made a fine *finish* and his eight and seventy years read like a romance!

There was a beautiful filial love in him. What a son he was, though he was orphaned so early! When he was an old man he remembered the day when his mother kissed him good-bye, and all his reminiscences of his roving father are full of affectionate and sacred regard.

The world would never have heard of John Wilson if he had not been converted. He never found himself till Jesus found him. There were wayward years in his life. He knew the lure of drink and the fascination of gambling. How was he saved? By the godly living of simple men. When he returned from America he was asked by a man named Hepple to bring a Bible for his father in Haswell. "Willie Hepple" was glad to have his son's gift and in this way he became interested in John Wilson. "Willie" was a Bible, since "Christians are the world's Bibles." "Willie" lived his life before the other's eyes and spoke his homely words of wisdom, and, all unknowingly, he wooed John Wilson from evil ways. By and by, in a kitchen class-meeting, John Wilson was converted, He knew the joy of forgiveness and the peace that Jesus gives. A man in Christ he became and awoke to the knowledge of life's solemnity and responsibility and meaning.

Then began his unending self-culture. It takes one's breath away to read of the educational code he laid down for himself. He realised his deficiencies and he meant to redeem the time. Grammar, history, the dictionary, economics, shorthand, logic and theology were the subjects of his self-imposed time-table. And he was a student to the last. It is marvellous how his intellect matured and the fine culture and self-mastery he attained. He was one of the best read men of his age.

Quite early he was marked for leadership.

"His from youth the leader's look,
Gave the law which others took."

He saw the ills and perils of the miner's life, the deprivations and hardships. The trades-union movement was the way to betterment, and with all his heart he flung himself into its advocacy and pleaded for its adoption. First in the local lodges and then on the County Executive his influence was felt and his leadership recognised, His progress was irresistible. From post to post he passed, each an ascent and each demanding more and more the gifts of the leader. For many years he had been the general secretary of the Durham Miners' Union.

John Wilson was a distinctive personality, and, though genius can never be fully explained, there were certain traits of his character which all could discern. His personal integrity was the secret of his strength. His opponents were as conscious of that as his friends. He could neither be bought nor bribed. His soul was truth and his heart was honour. We recall the affection and respect with which the late Bishop Westcott used to speak of him. He came into the closest intimacy with John Wilson during the strike of 1892 and the Bishop discovered the kind of man the labour leader was. The author of "Dreamthorpe" says that "The man who in this world can keep the whiteness of his soul is not likely to lose it in any other." John Wilson had the clean heart, the incorruptible spirit.

His courage was conspicuous and of all types, physical, mental and moral. He hardly knew what fear was, at least, not fear of difficulty or danger. Think of his courage in the face of

disaster and explosion, of the terrible fire and the deadly after-damp! Often he came, direct from Parliament, to the pit-head and the fearful shaft. He was ever one of the first to shaft. He was ever one of the first to venture into the zone of flame. We remember the West Stanley disaster. Bishop Moule learnt the horrors of the pitman's life in those dread days, and he has told of John Wilson's glorious bearing in act and speech. And his courage was revealed in other ways. It was often his duty to say unwelcome things, to find his friends in opposition. The fount of his fearlessness was his sense of right. He loved to quote Lowell's couplet:

"They are slaves who dare not be
In the right with two or three."

He had the courage to be in a minority. On occasion he could stand alone.

His patience and faith were strong fibres in his soul, and the one was the sequence of the other. Because he believed he never made haste. He had such faith in God, such a certitude in the victory of the right, such an assurance that "God holds the right side up," that he could be patient at all times and with all men. Strangers marvelled at the quietness of his demeanour, even the stillness of his general mood. We knew that there were vast masses of strength beneath the calmness.

He had a fine sense of humour and withal the deepest feelings. How merry he could be! How he enjoyed the humorous tale! His speeches were lit up with homely pleasantries. But there were great depths of passion in his heart. He did not often cry. Tears were seldom seen, but the founts were there and sometimes they were filled to overflowing. We remember the grief of his wife's death. They had been "sweethearts" for more than half-a-century and the strong, quiet man shed holy tears.

He had a real genius for friendship, and he was loyal to those to whom he gave his heart. He never wore his heart on his sleeve. He did not make friends hurriedly, but, once he had admitted them to the inner circle, he never forgot them. He was most punctilious in answering letters. Even when he was crowded with anxieties and sometimes when he was ill, if he could not write himself, he dictated replies for pure friendship's sake.

We know the genuineness and simplicity of his religious life. He was a devotee of the Bible. As a youth on board ship he read the Bible five times through. He fed his soul with the divinest thoughts. He lived a life of prayer, of definite and direct communion with God. He loved the House of God and the fellowship of His people. All who loved Jesus he loved, but he was most at home with his own people. He often confessed, in public and in private, that he would never have been an M.P. if he had not been a P.M. He was glad whenever he was able to speak at our great assemblies. In circuit and district business he took an effective part and he was interested in everything that affected his own Church. In the frankest and fullest way he acknowledged his indebtedness to the Church which had saved him and

trained him and opened the door to his life of usefulness. Best of all, he loved to preach, in little places more than in large ones, and everywhere he touched the heart to higher things.

His was the sovereignty of character. He had immense mental powers and tremendous personal authority, but the secret of the influence he exerted in the councils of industry and in the discussions of Parliament sprang from his sincere and noble manhood. The rich as well as the poor acknowledged his sway.

Many honours came to him and praises were often sounded in his ears. He was honoured by his own people, by the County Council and in the House of Commons. The Senate of the Durham University conferred the D.C.L. degree upon him and it was in every sense fitting. President Cleveland eulogised him when he was in America on the Arbitration Deputation. By speech and sketch he was popularised and lionised, but all this left him unspoilt. He knew himself. He rather wondered than gloried in his success. He was meekened rather than elated. Even as an old man he was free from pride.

It was good of God to let him die in sleep, and when he wakened in the other life he would neither be affrighted nor surprised. He would find heaven very homely. His beloved wife was there. He always knew that they would be re-united, and so they are.

We magnify the grace of God in him, and pray for the love that made him gracious and the faith which made him strong,

References

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