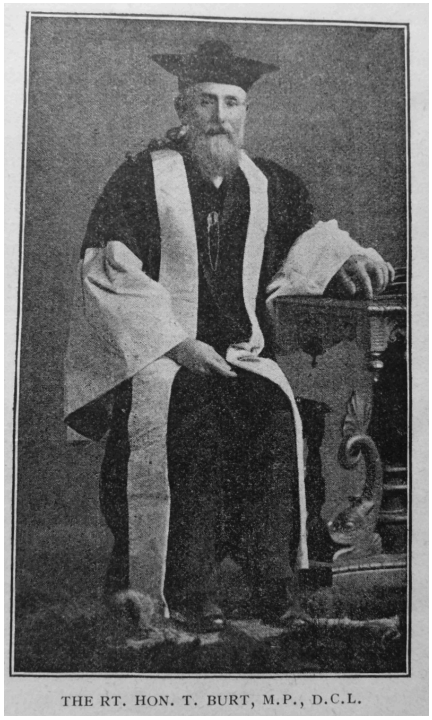
Interview with the Right Hon. T Burt, M.P. , D.C.L.

Transcription of article published Primitive Methodist Magazine by W.M. Patterson

The "Father" of the House of Commons
What the Illustrious veteran owes to Primitive Methodism


THE RT. HON. T. BURT, M.P., D.C.L.

INTERVIEWERS as such are not to the taste of Mr. Burt. The American sample he specially dislikes. But our arrangement was for a homely "crack" about men and matters of a more intimate character than high policy or industrial organisations and methods.

And we had a "crack" at the fireside in his cosy bed-chamber, where he has spent much more time during recent months than multitudes outside as well as those inside of his habitation, at Newcastle-on-Tyne, desired. His old enemy had been dealing severely with him during the long and severe winter, and asthma had been added to the bronchial assaults. Yet, spite of all, here was the "Father of the House of Commons," the venerable member of His Majesty's Privy Council, beloved by men of every shade of political thought who have a place in St. Stephen's, and revered by young and old in his own northern home—here he was, bright and cheery as of yore, kindly and "canny," mentally alert, and deftly using out of his great accumulations quotations and illustrations from the world's storehouse of literature as the talk proceeded. Again and again we found ourselves away from the particular line of the "crack," and had to pull ourselves up. The charm, the winsomeness, the thrall of the man Thomas Burt was exquisite. Time was unreckoned; its flight was startling. It was good to be there.

"My home influences," he told me at the opening, in the middle, and at the close of our conversation, "could not have been better." How tenderly he said it, and yet what a significant emphasis there was also present. "I cannot, even at this time of day, think of my parents without emotion. I would say they were perfect. If ever man was blessed I was. I would not exchange my father and mother with any of those born in the purple. They were very, poor at times, but I never lacked bread.

"My father was a Primitive Methodist local preacher. and class leader, as you know, and my mother was a member. Two of my father's brothers were also workers in the Seaton Delaval Church. Uncle Andrew was a local preacher and leader, and Uncle Robert was a leader and took an active part in the Sunday school, sometimes being superintendent. Books have been a great (if not the chief) factor in anything I may have learnt. Both my father and my mother were good readers, and were fond of reading. In my father's little bookcase there were a few—though very few—books which appealed to the juvenile fancy and taste. Reading aloud in the family circle was a frequent exercise.

To my father's and mother's encouragement and example, next to my own strong, resolute will, I attribute nearly everything I may have acquired in the shape of knowledge and mental stimulus."

"What is your earliest recollection of attending chapel?" I asked.

"When I was between six or seven years of age. That was at Seghill. In those early days," he continued, a smile playing upon his face, "I did not care for going to chapel." Breaking into a laugh, he added: "One week-night, I remember, my father asked me to go to chapel with him. I said I would go if it was a meeting where you could clap. He said I could clap. I went. It happened to be a missionary meeting, and I clapped."

"That would be about the time of the great strike in 1844?"

"It was. Along with all the other families at Seghill we were ejected from the colliery houses at that time. A friendly farmer, however, let us—there were three families of us—have a cottage, for which we paid one shilling and sixpence a week. The furniture was stored in the barn and elsewhere. After the strike was over, the owners would not give my father a place in the pit, because of the prominent stand he had taken during the dispute. He got work of a precarious sort, but my father was a very independent man, and he could not remain at Seghill. We went into the county of Durham — Elemore Colliery, Easington Lane. It was there I gave my first and only recitation at a Sunday school anniversary. Then we went to Haswell, where I first went to work down the pit as a trapper-boy, and thereafter as a donkey-driver. We had donkeys to pull the tubs at that time. The law then was that a boy could not go down into the workings until he was ten years of age. On the day before I reached ten I offered myself as a trapper-boy, and got employment to watch a trap-door."

"But boys used to be taken down at an earlier age than ten, Mr. Burt, were they not? "

"That is quite true. My father began at eight, and he was more favoured than his brothers, for he was younger than they, and they must have started at a yet more tender age. Dear me!" exclaimed the reformer, raising his voice: "When I have looked at my own boys as they got to ten, I have asked myself: 'Is it conceivable that I went down the pit when I was their age? What use could I ever have been?' "

"Wasn't it at Haswell where you first met the late Rev. Peter Mackenzie?" I asked.

"Yes, it was. He was my senior by some years. He might be about twenty, and was a powerful young man. He was a putter in the pit— hand-putting. A putter, as you may know, takes the coals away from 'the face' where the miners hew them, and puts them into tubs. The tubs are then taken to what is called 'the flat,' or station, and then driven to the shaft to be lifted to the surface.''

"Isn't there a humorous story of Peter and you having met on the same platform at a meeting many years afterwards?" I prompted.

"Ay," responded the veteran, laughing at the recollection. "It was at a temperance lecture he gave in Bewick Street Baptist Chapel, Newcastle. Peter was then a highly popular Wesleyan minister, and I had been for some years Member for Morpeth. I was his Chairman that night; and, in moving a vote

of thanks to me, he said it was a curious thing we had never met before, seeing that both of us were public men, and that both had been pitmen. In replying, I said: 'You have made a mistake, Mr. Mackenzie, we have met before.' 'Where?' he cried. 'At Haswell Colliery,' I answered; 'you were putting and I was a trapper-boy and donkey-driver.' In his own impulsive way, he immediately jumped up, and threw his arms around me, saying: 'Then Peter Burt would be your father?' I said he was. 'The best man I ever knew!' exclaimed the delighted man. 'God bless ye!' The audience appreciated the scene, you may be sure.

"Before his conversion, Peter was very rough, passionate, and swore heavily; but he had a kind nature, nevertheless. At that time boys were badly treated by the bigger lads, and Peter often interfered on their behalf. In a manner he became their protector, and that was what I liked about him. There were other two men at Haswell who became my father's intimate friends—Jacob and 'Newrick' (Newark) Featonby. Both were very able men, but different in temperament and manner. Newrick attained great popularity as a Wesleyan local preacher. Jacob was a local preacher among the Primitives, and was noted for his teaching capacity.

"But it was at South Hetton (where we subsequently went to live) that I began to take more interest in preachers and preaching. The two ministers, I remember, who then interested me most were called Henry Hebbron and Colin Campbell McKechnie. Mr. Hebbron was a big, powerful man, full of humour. His humour was a sort of thorn in the flesh to him. He made the people laugh, and he confessed to my father that he did not like it, as it interfered with his more serious work. My father was not given to ebullitions, but on one occasion, when Mr. Hebbron was preaching, he startled the congregation by crying out, 'Hear, hear!' Mr. Hebbron was surprised himself, and, no doubt, pleased at the appreciation; but he met the situation by at once saying to his hearers : 'Oh, Brother Burt means just what you would mean if you shouted hallelujah!'

"Mr. McKechnie and I became great friends, and that friendship never was broken. As a lad I used to hear him preach regularly when he came to South Hetton. He was a generous man as well as an able preacher. My father used to go with him to visit the folk, and any one who was hard up, after shaking hands with him on leaving, found half a crown in their palm. One knows that half-crowns would be scarce in those days amongst Primitive Methodist ministers. In after years Mr. McKechnie, when he was editor, got me to write articles for the 'Christian Ambassador,' and I visited him when he lived in Holloway. Our attachment was very close. There is a book he gave me," and Mr. Burt handed me Martineau's "Endeavours after the Christian Life," which he had had brought from the library; "and I prize it highly," he added, with a beam of pleasure. "I have read all the sermons in it, some of them more than once. Nobody would suppose Martineau to have been a Unitarian. Mr. McKechnie had a great sermon, based on Job xxviii. I heard it several times. And how he could read that chapter!

"After South Hetton, we came over to what mother called 'home '—Northumberland," remarked Mr. Burt, with a smile. "We landed at New Delaval, after a short time removing to Cramlington, and thence to Seaton Delaval. We were like gypsies, shifting our tents frequently. It was a remarkable thing, however, that we stopped at Seaton Delaval eight or nine years. The interesting period of my life occurred there—from my fourteenth to my twenty-second year. I attended chapel regularly, and remained in the Sunday school until I was upwards of twenty, being a teacher part of the time. It was then I received an intellectual stimulus from some of the travelling preachers. Great numbers of the

young miners were members, or attended chapel, and many of them gave themselves to intellectual pursuits. My first impulse came to me there in the direction of mental culture—study and appreciation of books.

"Our cottage was the home of the Superintendent minister of the North Shields Circuit, and it was then necessary for him to stay overnight. And when I think of the accommodation," reflected Mr. Burt, an amused smile playing upon his countenance, "I wonder how it was managed. One room and an unceiled garret upstairs! It seems to me now to be amazing how we could take in such distinguished lodgers as the Revs. Thomas Smith (who afterwards became Governor of Elmfield College), Thomas Southron (with whom I became particularly intimate; he was a bit of a character), William Lister, Ralph Fenwick, Thomas Greenfield (a teacher, indeed), William Saul, and others. Most of them were fond of books, and I listened to their conversation and talked to them. They encouraged me in my studies, which at that time were mainly directed to the topics contained in 'Cassell's Popular Educator' and Chambers' educational works. The value of those books can never be told. I owe much to Cassell's and Chambers'. Cash was scarce in those days, but I had a little pocket-money, and my parents encouraged me to buy books.

"I was not merely intimate with the preachers who came to our house, but with some of them it grew to an attached friendship. This was particularly the case with Mr. McKechnie and Mr. Southron. There was another in after years—Hugh Gilmore. We became close companions and friends, and we read together. How splendidly he got on in Adelaide! The letters I had from him told of the admiration he had for the Australians. He found them more democratic than the people at home; less class distinction amongst them. They are enemies of the race who create class distinctions!" burst out the great-souled leader of men. "It is long since I attached any importance to classes and professions. Judged by my own experience, I would say that the middle classes in this country are afflicted more with what Carlyle called 'gigmanity '* than what is called the aristocracy. The latter are more free from airs and 'side' than the middle classes. In that sense they are more democratic, being neither arrogant nor condescending—nor patronising, which is more nauseous still.''.

"And what, Mr. Burt, might I venture to ask, is your message to the Church—speaking of the Church in the widest sense?"

"Well, I would like the Church to be more sympathetic with the masses of the people, and especially to aid them in their efforts toward improvement—social as well as moral and spiritual."

"But your experience has led you to believe, from your wide and intimate knowledge of working men, that their social and intellectual advancement has had its roots in their moral and spiritual uplift?"

"Most certainly, I do believe that that has very largely been the case. Moral and spiritual movements have done much for the betterment of working men, and Methodism has done a great work amongst the miners of the country."

"Many thanks for your special kindness, Mr. Burt," I said as I was about to leave the chamber in which I had had the delightful fellowship of a great and good man, one, I knew, who had been guided throughout his career by the spirit of Jesus Christ. "There is one other question, however, I wish to

ask you ‘on my own ’ —that is, it is apart from the particular errand I had this morning. What, in your judgment, is the lack in German ‘ kultur’ which has produced the men and methods the world has been a witness of for two years?”

Promptly Mr. Burt replied: “The thing lacking in German ‘kultur’ is the moral and spiritual element. Their ‘kultur’ is practical materialism, the worship of machinery, and a complete abnegation of ‘the subtle thing called spirit.’ ”

_____

* The interpretation of ‘‘gigmanity”’ is that because a family owned a gig to ride in, it was therefore entitled to social consideration.

References

Primitive Methodist Magazine 1916/656