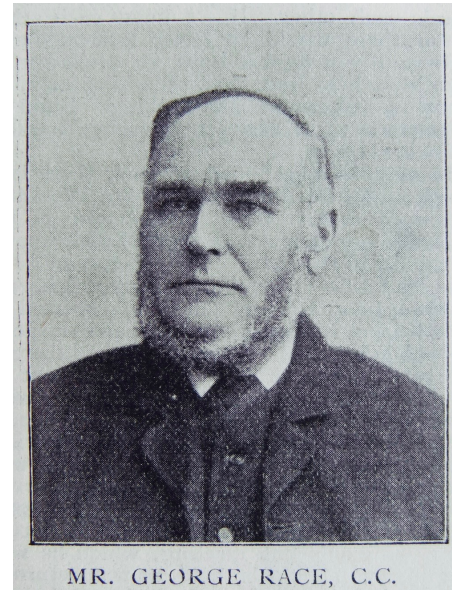


George Race

Transcription of Sketch in the Christian Messenger by 'Douglas'

THE best fruit often lies hidden beneath the leaves of the tree on which it grows. The local preachers most in evidence are by no means necessarily the men best worth knowing. In the quiet upper reaches of the Valley of the Wear, in the sequestered village of Westgate, with a retiring nature that shrinks from the glare and bustle of town life, there dwells one of the rarest spirits in the ranks of our lay ministry. Few similar areas of country possess so many sturdy, exceptional characters as Weardale. In the estimation of the strong men of the Dale, however, George Race is undoubtedly one of the most outstanding figures. The name of Race is one to conjure with in Weardale, indeed in the North generally, for Mr. George Race, Senior, the father of the subject of this sketch, was perhaps one of the most able and remarkable laymen in Primitive Methodism. He frequently contributed to the 'Ambassador,' articles, the titles of which indicated the philosophic bent of his mind:- 'The Philosophy of Coleridge,' 'Mansel's Limits of Religious Thought,' 'Conversion the Abiding Miracle of Christianity,' &c., &c. Mr. Race has inherited much from his father.



Born in Westgate in 1834, owing to his mother's illness he was brought up with his grandmother and bachelor uncle, Mr. Thos. Coulthard, of Swynhope Burn, Westgate, his uncle being at that time agent for the Weardale lead mines. Swynhope Burn is one of the most beautiful and romantic glens in Weardale. One of the many burns that feed the Wear here comes tumbling down a lovely mountain gorge, over a solid bed of limestone, the cliffs rising quite perpendicularly from the burn side in some places, while both cliff and hill are so thickly wooded with trees and bushes as to be almost impassable. In one of the wider parts of the glen stands the fine old farmhouse, evidently a fortified building at one time, where Mr. Race was brought up, and where the lad could hardly sleep on wild winter nights as the great stones were rolled over the rocky bed of the burn by the mountain torrent. In such surroundings the youth's imagination was kindled and the poet's intense love of nature developed. His love of nature has led him to no mean acquaintance with geology and botany; but Mr. Race hears the voices of nature. He

'Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones.'

We have heard him significantly say

' Nature never did betray
The soul that lov'd her.'

We have known him in his long country rambles pause with tears in his eyes, almost, to listen to the plaintive cry of the curlew, or the call of the plover or grouse. Mr. Race marks, too, the sacred silence of nature. One of the deepest joys of his life is to silently gaze upon some wild, distant landscape alone. He will even in his somewhat advancing years, take frequent long walks or fishing excursions to the higher reaches of the Tees, the wild scenery of High-Cup Nick and Cauldron Snout

being favourite resorts. We shall not soon forget a description he gave of that neighbourhood at a Harvest Festival, even to the little tuft of heather on the rock. As a climax he said, 'And I felt as though God was there. And,' he added, impressively, 'He was.' No man understands Mr. Race who is unable to appreciate his devout and intense love of nature.

At the age of twelve, his father requiring him in his successful grocery business, he left the village school, where he appears to have made remarkable progress. His father's home in those days was the constant resort of such ministers as Revs. W. Sanderson, Thos. Smith, T. Greenfield, C.C. M'Kechie, and other kindred spirits. His invalid mother, who caught cold by standing on damp grass at a camp meeting, and who suffered from chronic rheumatism for thirteen years, was unable to turn the leaves of the Bible, and young George would sit on a stool at her feet and turn the leaves for her, while she read its precious truths to her boy. Such formative influences told for good on the youth, and at the age of twenty-two he was converted in a now too-seldom-heard-of cottage prayer-meeting. About four or five years after his conversion, during the superintendency of the late Rev. H. Phillips in the Westgate circuit, Mr. Race received 'a note' to accompany and assist Dr. Watson in his appointments. His first attempt to preach was in the little old chapel at Rookhope where he spoke, with his eyes closed, for about five minutes. After having served his apprenticeship as a cabinet maker and joiner, Mr. Race ultimately commenced business for himself as joiner and builder. He has built and altered scores of Primitive Methodist and Wesleyan chapels in the North of England.

Mr. Race is a voluminous reader, and therefore 'a full man.' A conversation with him on almost any topic is quite an education. A peep at his well-used library is a revelation of the man's intellectual whereabouts. Our own Quarterly Review is fully appreciated. Amongst the books in sight on the shelves are 'The Expositor's Bible,' Fairbairn's 'Christ and Modern Theology,' Newman Smyth's 'Christian Ethics,' Bruce's 'Providential Order,' the works of Carlyle, Emerson, Johnson, and Joseph Cook, Bohn's 'Standard' and 'Scientific' Libraries, Montaigne's 'Essays,' The 'Tatler' and 'Guardian,' 'Spectator,' 'Congregational Lectures.' Mitford's 'History of Greece,' Allison's 'Europe,' Hallam's 'Middle Ages,' Vinet's 'Studies on Pascal,' and Clark's 'Foreign Theological Library,' while the standard works on Philosophy one dare not begin to mention. Many of his books however, are hidden from sight. Indeed, we have heard some of our most thoughtful ministers say that he possesses the largest and best library they have seen in any layman's home in our denomination. Perhaps his father's books dealing with systematic philosophy are not now so freely handled as when his father was alive; but Mr. Race is a philosopher. He has a quick intuitive perception of principles. He cannot dwell on the superficialities of a text or subject. If the facts or incidents on hand do not serve to suggest or illustrate some principle, he has nothing to say. He is not great in the artifices of the rhetorician, his style in the pulpit generally being conversational; but his topic will always be approached in a philosophic temper, and almost invariably receives masterly treatment, and yet so clear and interesting, lighted up with occasional touches of humour, that 'the common people hear him gladly.' His intuitive glances at the principles lying at the heart of his subject frequently give rise to some short, telling phrases that are like lightning flashes - marvellously illuminative and electric. Presiding the other day over a mass meeting of Quarrymen, Mr. Race went on: 'I am a working man myself. I have been a hard worker all my life, and consequently take a lively interest in working men, and in any man who tries to help himself. I began life as a stone-breaker. There were no disputes between capital and labour. My employer helped me to break the biggest stones and paid me well. I never struck work, and he never locked me out. There is a philosophy in it. Kindness is the best thing

to conciliate men. Acts of Parliament may be passed, and other Acts to interpret those Acts, but I have more faith in men being kindly disposed towards each other. If we knew each other better there would be fewer lock-outs and strikes. If you want to know your fellow-man love him, help him. . . . Working men, be virtuous. Character is everything. Build up character. . . . Character touches immortality.'

It may be questioned whether there is a single family in the higher part of Weardale unknown to Mr. Race. His esteem of his fellow-dalesmen is not decided by their wealth or the cut of the coat. 'A man's a man for a' that,' is a rule of his life, and any neighbour, however poor, will not fail to be respected by him, if there is anything in the man to respect. Weardale is proud of Mr. Race, and there is scarcely any public position it would not be ready to give him. He did much along with the late Rev. Hugh Gilmore to secure a School Board for Weardale, and served as its vice-chairman six years out of the twelve he was on it. For the last seven years he has served as a County Councillor. Only once has anyone dared to contest his seat. On that occasion, with only one meeting, which he was not anxious should be held, he was returned by a majority about four times the total number polled by his opponent.

The Westgate circuit would be ready to confer any honour upon him in its power to give. He has served as circuit steward for many years and is also a class leader. The only time he would consent to be sent as a delegate to his District Meeting, that assembly sent him to Conference. But he shrinks from the publicity of the greater world, and loves his native dale, where, as his somewhat failing health permits, he renders his unostentatious service.

Many are the men worth knowing in our lay ministry, but the list would be incomplete indeed, if George Race's name were not included, and that in the very front rank.

References

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