

## **Rev Thomas Southron**

### **Transcription of Obituary In the Primitive Methodist Magazine by W Johnson**

THE Rev. Thomas Southron died at Darlington, September 15, 1899, at the ripe age of eighty-one years. His life almost paralleled the history of his Church, to whose service the best of him was freely given. His death has removed not only a distinct figure, but a marked personality - a moulding power in the Connexion. Mr. Southron was first, "an ambassador for Christ," next, he ranked among the builders of his Church. What is built for the many is built by the many, and he belonged to those earlier spirits of the Connexion, who, fierce with zeal for Christ and love to men, by toil and sacrifice, strenuous evangelism, successive legislation, and steady discipline, did their part in giving to the Connexion both solidity and shape; at the same time imparting to it its genius of freedom from all that savours of priestcraft and one-man rule; with that elasticity of adaptation which make it indeed a Church of then people, and which promises to make it a Church for the future.

Mr. Southron was born in Durham city, September 4, 1818. Of the conditions of his early life our information is scanty. His father was a tradesman, strong-minded, intelligent, with keen political instincts; whose sympathies and force of character drew round him in his own home kindred spirits; who discussed with interest the great questions of the day, such as the results of the Waterloo victory, the scheme of Lord Durham, when member for the county, for Parliamentary Reform, the social distress in the country, the agitations and their causes which preceded the repeal of the Corn Laws.

These mimic parliaments in his father's house became a formative influence in the boy's character. Beside listening to the arm-chair debates with wonder and interest, he saw the Iron Duke, of Waterloo fame, in his native city. He heard that leader of Liberal thought, afterwards Lord Durham, and other distinguished Reformers. As a result, interest in his country was early awakened, a wide outlook was given him, he began to learn how to look at things, and as he grew up, and convictions began to shape themselves in his mind, they were decidedly patriotic and liberal. He was a student of European history all his life, and held very decided political views. If he did not habituate himself to the political platform, it was for other and higher reasons than lack of information, courage, or interest in the social and political welfare of his fellows and of his country.

Another influence which impressed his boyish mind, excited and fed his imagination, was his native city itself. So historic, its grand cathedral investing and overshadowing the spot with ecclesiastical sanctity and power for over 800 years, urning the «lust of generations, enshrining great names with the memorials of kings and distinguished leaders of the Church -the whole so beautifully situated, in nature softly swathed, on the banks of the peaceful Wear - left its effect in his lively imagination, his love of history, and his decided views on all ecclesiastical questions.

The one determining event in Mr. Southron's life was his conversion to Jesus Christ. His formal education, because of circumstances, was too limited to give him his career. But Christ gave him it. He was converted when twenty years of age through the agency of our Durham Society, which he joined. Conversion to him meant both change and call. It was the new life begun and consecration to its service. Placed under the counsel and assistance of the late Mr. Coward, he became a local

preacher, and two years from his conversion was called into the regular ministry, by his native circuit. These sudden and successive changes may seem swift transitions into a career so sacred and important as the Christian ministry; but they are all testimonies to fitness if not equipment. And it has been so before, that when fitness is there, events seldom dally. Equipment hastens to the man who is fit; because he is interested, alive to his responsibilities. In the year of Mr. Southron's conversion, 1838, Durham was separated from Sunderland, and became an independent station. Mr. Coward at that time was a prominent local preacher, as well as a good type of Christian character. Mr. Southron's association with him at the beginning of his religious experience was happy. The association became a lasting friendship. When the former died Mr. Southron was called to conduct his funeral service in the Jubilee Chapel, Durham, where he preached' with power to a large assembly.

Mr. Southron's active ministry covered the long period of forty-four years. He travelled in the following stations:—Durham, Ripon, North Shields, Shotley Bridge, Sunderland, Newcastle-on-Tyne, Allendale, Whitby, Carlisle, Stockton, Bishop Auckland, and Newcastle-on-Tyne Second Station, where his active ministry closed through the breakdown of his health. Twenty-two years were spent in three stations - North Shields and Shotley Bridge - in each of which he travelled three times, and Sunderland, where he spent five years. Mr. Southron was sent to some of these stations purposely, when they laboured under a cloud, or were rent with division; and his organising power, his tact, devotion to work, and his self-sacrificing labours never failed to secure their results, in pulling the station together, infusing life into it, and in securing more or less the extension of circuit interests and the salvation of men.

As a minister, Mr. Southron put much into his circuit work. But he was too strong a man to remain local and limited to circuit life. He was a foremost man in his district during most of his ministry. For many years he efficiently filled the position of District Secretary, also that of Examiner to the College Students and Probationers. Few men could create more interest in committee work, and extract more out of it. He found positive pleasure in it. He was seldom absent, even when his attendance meant considerable expense. He was smart and expert in committee. In debate he was less strong in argument than acute and ready; with an instinct for the weaknesses of a position, and a sharp eye for the humour of a situation. He was frequently Chairman of District Meetings, twice Secretary of the Conference, beside filling minor places of honour and trust. It may not be widely known that Mr. Southron was one of the first initiators of a Connexional Institution for the training of ministers. He was one of four who instigated the first discussion on the subject in the Conference of 1844 at Lynn Regis. During the District Meeting held in Sunderland the same year, the Rev. W. Lister, Rev. T. Southron, Messrs. Gordon Black and T. Gibson, discussed the question over Mrs. Branfoot's tea-table, with the result that Gordon Black, a Deed Poll member, raised the question in the said Conference. Four years later, Mr. Southron read a Paper before the Sunderland District Preachers' Association, on the "Education of Ministers," which was printed in the *Christian Ambassador* for 1859, under the title, "A School for the Prophets." The Rev. C.C. M'Kechnie, Editor of the *Christian Ambassador*, wrote Mr. Southron at Carlisle, complimenting him on the excellence of the Paper, and among other things said: "If there ever be a college you may consider yourself the author of it." Mr. Southron's interest in the Sunderland Theological Institute is well known. How he devoted himself to its business, and was ever ready to further its success in the educational interests of the students.

Now that his work is finished, Mr. Southron stands before us, not as a literary figure, not as a popular preacher everywhere in demand, but as a born administrator, a great organiser, and hard, practical worker. Mr. Southron was more the builder of men than the pilot. It is this leading trait in his character which accounts for his being so strongly a Connexional man. All his character was very decisive; and while his Christian faith was rooted in clearest conviction, and he gloried in Christ Jesus as his Lord and Master, yet his own Church - Primitive Methodism - had not in its ranks a more faithful and devoted servant. No man knew its rules, its history, its customs better, and no man adhered to and defended them more loyally. He was indefatigable in the service of his Church. He shirked nothing he was asked to do, however difficult the task, and everything he did was done whole-heartedly and well. And all his work made for peace, unity, and the prosperity of the Church. His admiration and love for his Church were expressed thirty-five years ago in an important assembly in the following words, to the sincerity of which his life testifies: "It may not be out of the range of propriety in the midst of this solemn service distinctly and emphatically to avow a deep sense of increasing affection for the Church of my youthful election, growing and supreme preference to its arrangements and operations, and a fixed and holy resolve to exert all my energies in renewed diligence to the accomplishment of its purposes."

Mr. Southron's was a nature often misunderstood. He was strongly individual. This was apparent in his personality. The well-shaped head, the dark, piercing eye, the clear-cut features, and the firm lips, all indicated strength of character and will. He lacked neither emotion nor humour, yet his manner was sometimes brusque, even to offensiveness to natures unlike his own. His ideals were of the Spartan order, his natural temper more critical than sympathetic. Strong in the manly qualities himself, he expected them in other men. Anything small or puerile in men he was impatient of, and disliked. This accounted for his brusque manner. Behind it all there was an honest and a tender heart. His colleagues who travelled with him loved him and speak of him with highest regard and reverence. Mr. Southron faced his sufferings as he faced the world, with an exterior of steel, yet he felt most keenly. I once saw him stricken with a grief which would have broken many men double, he bore it like nails, and I knew at the time his heart bled within. Behind his manner also was the most generous man, the kindest host, the tenderest friend, and the perfect gentleman. Like most men, he was seen at his best in his own house, where he was delightful company, humorous, genial, instructive, and concerned about everybody's comfort but his own. He would neither allow to set yourself a chair, nor open the door for yourself when departing, but he would not stand at the door with you.

Though distinguished as an organiser and practical worker, our departed brother was both a student and a distinguished preacher of the Word. In the course of his ministry he read carefully and well, he attained a considerable knowledge of the Hebrew and Greek languages, was well-up in history, English and Biblical subjects, and was strong in Methodist Theology. As a speaker he was gifted and fluent, original and powerful. He commanded great eloquence, had an unfettered, unconventional style, a vivid imagination and incisive power. In spirit he was most humble and devout, spiritually-minded, thoroughly devoted to his work. During his ministry he had the joy, amid its hardships, of witnessing much fruit - many who accepted the faith, many who witnessed a good confession, and many who triumphed through divine grace. The great theme of his preaching was Christ. He seldom departed in his discourses from the first principles of saving faith. The conception and spirit of his own ministry are read in the following solemn and weighty counsel he spake to others in an

ordination address: "Yours, as ministers of the Gospel of Christ, is the highest condition of responsibility which man can possibly occupy. Your own conscience, vows, resolutions, desires, aspirations, devotions, all hold you in the indestructible bonds of accountability. Individually, ever be able to say, My own conscience bears me testimony that with all possible earnestness and humility I have diligently and devoutly sought to keep my vows and if I have failed the blame is not attachable to unfaithfulness, but to inability to scale the lofty eminence of wisdom, dignity, power and success, which in the name of Christ, for the glory of God and the salvation of men, I attempted."

During his first appointment to Sunderland Station, Mr. Southron married Miss Armstrong, of Shotley Bridge, who for over fifty years shared the labours and joys of his life, and proved an excellent and affectionate wife. With a poor home and a pittance of salary which was their lot for many years; and this, amid arduous toil, weary journeys and rebuffs, was a strain upon both faith and affection. But neither wavered, they remembered they were the servants of Christ who also suffered these things, and they "endured as seeing Him who is invisible." The hardships of their lot but chastened affection, they grew more and more to each other. One of the sweetest lights which rested on their last days was that of the holy love between them, of the joy they found in each other. Death hardly separated them, within ten days of each other both crossed death's flood. Ere loss was realised they were reunited in the heavenly home, and in the grand reward of the redeemer's Kingdom, as they had been in its labour and suffering.

From the time of superannuation to his death – fifteen years - Mr. Southron's health was precarious. During the limits of this period, always physically feeble, he failed somewhat in hearing, and his frame shrunk; but the mind kept its alertness and the eye its fire. His dauntlessness and courage never failed him. Towards the end more than once he characteristically remarked: "I am going down, I know I am failing, but it is no good crying about it." Within two or three weeks of his death he attended the District Committee at Greenbank, asked questions, and took part in the business. He was last out at the chapel. He never missed an opportunity of attending worship. I was told of a pathetic scene at the end. His wife was ill, he laboured to secure her a warm bath in the bedroom with utensils such as he had, clumsy and inconvenient. Suffering himself from cold, the unfinished effort exhausted his strength. He sat on a chair by the bedside beaten, ill, alone, helpless, and looked at his wife with tears in his eyes. Pneumonia set up, and in a few days the brave spirit was released. He once said, "Pay prayerful and laborious attention to the study of the Bible; master the grand theological doctrines of the Bible; an elementary system is soon acquired, but do not forget that the reality is illimitable. The system expands wide as the measureless realities of infinity." His last words were about the Bible. He faced the solemn and "measureless realities" with his feet on that foundation.

In Mr. Southron's death we have two regrets - one is, that he has left us so little in a literary form. He had the knowledge and power above many. A few articles in the *Christian Ambassador*, and the magazines of previous years are all that remain. The other is, that any tinge of disappointment from the Church he so well served, should have shadowed his later years. He made no complaint, but the shadow was there.

Resolutions from the General Committee, the District and other Committees, were passed, sorrowing at the loss of so great and good a man to the Church, yet rejoicing in the work he had accomplished, the ripe years to which he had been spared, and that many souls will be the crown of joy in the day of the Lord.

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### **References**

*Primitive Methodist Magazine* 1901/386

Note: Thomas died on 15 March 1900, not 15 September 1899 as stated above.