

## Edmund Rawlings the Winsome

### Transcription of Sketch in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by Grapho

*“A Man an Hiding-Place from the Wind” - Isaiah*

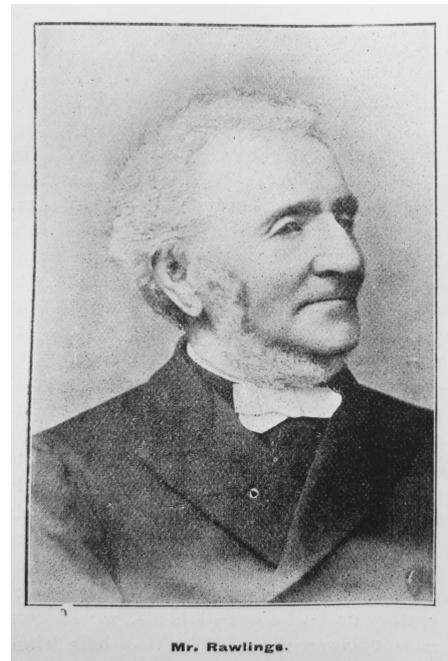
No one can question the value and even necessity of architects, leaders, and directors - men who conceive great plans and projects; however, in our admiration of these we may overlook the other men who work out the schemes of those who have planned them. In all great works and institutions there must be prominent and commanding personalities; but these only presuppose the obscure and often nameless many who are scarcely second in importance to those who are more conspicuous. The brilliant campaign of officers requires the heroism of the common soldiers to execute it, but the specifications and plans of architects and contractors need the humbler but none the less imperative toils of another type of men to bring them to completion.

And Primitive Methodism can never value too highly, and will never appreciate to the full its indebtedness to the *circuit minister*. Our church has had her statesmen - scholars and orators for whom we have nothing but praise and appreciation; still the deep and enduring work in every generation of our history has mostly been done by the labours of the men who have patiently and persistently done their work in the narrow spheres to which they have been called. Quietly building, and in every possible way serving their church and their God, often amid discouragements, sometimes without appreciation from men, but never without the recognition and approval of heaven. As we write these words a host of such men, dead and living, procession through our fancy - men whose toils are the concremented strength of our church - men who plant the trees from which the choice fruits are gathered - men whose labours, and sacrifices have, and still perpetuate our Connexional heroics.

And of such men Edmund Rawlings is a magnificent specimen. A man of no dazzling gifts, but one who was full of the “milk of human kindness,” while undistinguished by commanding powers, or brilliant attainments, there were unmistakably present these qualities which more than compensated for the absence of these, and without which great gifts are more repelling than attractive. Graces are better than gifts, in fact they are the best of heaven’s dowerments, for splendid talents may dazzle without attracting, and over-awe without profiting. Graces are the most God-like qualities, and the most effective factors of usefulness.

“They lure to distant worlds,  
And lead the Way.”

Edmund Rawlings was born at Colne, in Wiltshire, on September 23rd, 1817. His parents belonged to the Established Church, and so his early years were connected with the influences and teachings of the Church of England. However, when he was about seventeen years of age he heard some of our



early preachers in the open-air, and the word produced in him conviction of sin which resulted in the new creatureship in Christ Jesus. He almost immediately became connected with us as a people, as a preacher, being known in the locality as the "boy preacher." The genuineness of his conversion, and the quiet enthusiasm of his newly-found love to Christ, secured for him at; so early an age, the confidence of the people and the call to preach. His youthfulness in part may have accounted for the eagerness with which his services were sought; but there was much more than the gratification satisfied, or curiosity responded to, in hearing a lad preach. He was wise beyond his years - he knew divine secrets - he was so human and sympathetic - he loved God with no common, and ordinary love, and this overflowed in music and sweetness when his words fell upon the ears of the people.

He laboured only some twelve months as a local preacher, when it became most evident that the ministry was to be his destiny. So when but about eighteen years of age, in the year 1835, he was called into the ranks of our ministry.

Unfortunately we have no information to hand of his earliest appointments, and it is not till the year 1843 that we are able to trace the steps of a ministry so full of tenderness and success. It was in this latter year that while travelling in the Frome circuit he was appointed by the March Quarterly Meeting to open a new mission at Glastonbury. Here he arrived on April 15th, after walking twenty-one miles from Frome. Arriving here in the evening very fatigued, his discomfort was increased by the difficulty he found in securing a place to sleep. The next morning being Sunday he began his work by walking to the outskirts of the town, pausing to sing and pray at several places, and inviting the people to a service in the Market Place. Thus, unparadingly, began Primitive Methodism in G1astonbury - a man with a brimful heart of love preaching the message of mercy to the people at the Market Cross; but this service was the inception of our work as a Denomination in that part, and to Edmund Rawlings the honour came to commence the work there, which through the years has grown into a prosperous Circuit.

His active ministry extended over a period of forty-one years, which comprised labours on hard and difficult stations, among which were Frome, Mitcheldever, Glastonbury, Highworth, Wallingford (two terms), Poole, Witney, Salisbury, Winchester and Faringdon.

Those were the pioneering years of our history as a Church, and unfancied almost to us to-day must have been the privations, and hardships of these old Fathers of ours who went out in God's name to declare to the neglected people his love-message. They had to face not alone the ignorance and disinclination of the people, but often their viciousness and cruelty, and in addition the bigotry of clericalism and squiredom. However, these old sires were not the men to cower before difficulties, they had a mission, and to execute it they despised suffering and welcomed hardships. Theirs was the strength to meet and overcome obstacles. Their labours have won our heritage. Their steps have left the prints of Freedom's feet, and they belong to the long line of God's valiant ones -

"The bright offering of whose blood hath made  
The ground it bathed e'en as an altar, whence  
High thoughts shall rise for ever. They bore  
'Midst flame and sword, their witness of the Cross,  
With its victorious inscription, girt  
As with a conqueror's robe."

We do not claim too much for these noble souls of the early days of our church, when we think of them among the list of Freedom's Martyrs and Faith's Heroes. For it is not alone martyrdom to sacrifice life in death; but to consume it in unselfish and self-forgetful toils for man and God. And this living sacrifice and self-immolation were the glory and power of these old Fathers of ours.

As we write there is open before us the journal of Edmund Rawlings, and it is as simple and unaffected account of a life consumed with labours diversified and abundant.

Not one word of boast, neither of complaint, nor of self-trust, but much of joyous confidence, quiet heroism, patient devotion, and loving surrender to his arduous labours. He was no Boanerges, but rather a Barnabas. He was full of sweet reasonableness, naturally gentle and kindly, and the grace of God made him almost doubly gracious.

Some men produce in others a sense of irritation. They stir in us the worst, and never awake the best. They may be clever and learned; but they do not exercise the truest and noblest influence upon their fellows.

True servants of God may be wanting in the orator's commanding skill, or the controversialist's power of criticism and denunciation, but they wield a more widespread and pervading power than either. Such men bring sunshine wherever they come. The feeble find in them strength - fearful souls creep out of their hiding places to welcome them - hard words are hushed in their presence - sternness even relaxes, and churlishness tries to be considerate when they are near. Such men know best the secret of how to -

"Reclaim the wanderer, bind the broken heart,  
And arm themselves in panoply complete  
Of heavenly temper."

The power which Edmund Rawlings evinced was not in his pulpit performances. And in saying this we do not hint that he was even deficient here; however, the charm of his influence lay in other directions. It was in the beautifulness of his personality - the gentleness of his spirit - the peaceableness of his disposition - the skill with which he could prevent and arrest discord, and in the readiness he ever showed to serve all who needed help. His preaching was absolutely devoid of display, and efforts for effect, or sensational results. He knew his Bible, and he knew his message, and he never forgot that he was God's messenger charged with Heaven's overtures of love. And he thus commanded attention, not so much by "the enticing words of man's wisdom," as by the calm confidence of a Divine Messenger, and the conspicuous and inflexible concern to bless and save those who were his hearers. As it preacher, he was one whom Cowper would include in his fine description of what a real gospel preacher should be, when he wrote:-

"There stands the messenger of truth, there stands  
The legate of the skies! - His theme divine,  
His office sacred, his credentials clear.  
I venerate the man whose heart is warm,  
Whose hands are pure, whose doctrine and whose life,  
Coincident, exhibit lucid proof  
That he is honest in the sacred cause.

To such I render more than mere respect,  
Whose actions say that they respect themselves,  
And love their fellows and revere their God.”

He was a typical “circuit minister.” He was a true servant of Jesus Christ, and therefore a servant of men for Christ’s sake. He was no mere ecclesiastic who lived in a sphere of official dignity with an arrogant sense of ministerial authority, neither was he a hireling who served because he was paid for it, and measured out his labours and gifts accordingly. To him the ministry was simply a vocation, it was his life-work, and he brought to it the whole of his sympathetic and loving heart. The people knew him to be one of God's choice spirits, a chosen vessel made meet for the Master’s use. He did not live *on* the people, but *for* the people. He was something more than the preacher who amazed or bewildered them with questionable oratory or half-digested ideas, which often pass for cleverness; but he was their friend, adviser and comforter.

His winning and sympathetic soul drew men like a magnet. He wooed and won people by the charm of his saintliness. Those in trouble sought him for counsel. Those in distress went to him for solace. Those nearing the valley of the shadows sent for him to soothe their last hours with his presence. And those in the morning of life, or in the brightness of prosperity found joy in the cheeriness of his friendship.

His journal, notwithstanding its limitations and fragmentariness, is a wonderful record of varied toils. Hardly a day is mentioned but what it speaks of intercourse in some form or other with the people. He was a wonderful visitor - he moved in and out among the people as their shepherd, in whose joys and sorrows he had a share. He did not visit as a guest, or a gossip; but as a spiritual guide and helper.

In the church of San Leno at Verona, there is a statue of that saint in a sitting posture, and the artist has given him knees so short that he has no lap whatever. Someone has quaintly and naively said - “San Leno could not have been a nursing father.” Edmund Rawlings *was* a nursing father. His circuit was his larger family, and the people were his spiritual children. And it is not to be doubted that many of our Connexional fathers did more by their nursing than they did by their preaching. And it may be worth while for us to consider whether or not we to-day do not need to return to the old custom of doing a little more nursing! Many, impervious to our preaching, might yield to our nursing - change the word to concern, sympathy and pastoral care, or any other which contains the idea of fatherly helpfulness !

This ministry of usefulness extended over a period of fifty-six years, which comprised forty-one as an active minister, and fifteen as a supernumerary. It was during this latter portion that we were privileged to make his friendship. He was superannuated in 1876, but this by no means meant relinquishing his beloved work. For he was engaged by the London first circuit, with Cooper's Gardens as its head, and subsequently by London seventh circuit, with Hammersmith as its centre. It was while at Hackney that we were first acquainted with him. The years had told heavily upon him; but his was the unconquered love which was unwilling to spend the declining years in retirement and rest. He preached often, with an added tenderness which ripened experience had brought to his natural kindliness of soul. And he went in and out among the people with a radiant face which spoke

of the sunny heart which would not be darkened with the weakness and burdens which the years brought.

The scriptures speak of those who *“bring forth fruit in old age.”* Nature decays, but grace thrives. The trees of the Lord are full of sap, and when the winter time of life comes their verdure remains unwithered. Divine grace gives to the soul immortal youth, and unbounded fertility and fruitfulness.

“The plants of grace shall ever live:  
Nature decays, but grace must thrive;  
Time, that all things else impairs,  
Still makes them flourish strong, and fair.”

We look back upon those years with no little amount of thankfulness, for Edmund Rawlings is one among the few who have pictured to us an ideal old age. An old age without bitterness and irritation-impatience and regrets. He was young and vivacious though years and toils had made him venerable. He was such as a young minister could love, for he was not out of sympathy with books and topics which were among our passions in those days; neither was he impatient with the signs which were beginning to show themselves, that changes were knocking for admittance in methods of work, and of presenting the truth. We think of him as we write as one of the most beautiful old men we have known, and Wordsworth’s verse comes to our memory with its appropriateness to him:-

“Thy thoughts, thy feelings shall not die,  
Nor leave thee, when grey hairs come nigh,  
A melancholy slave;  
But an old age serene and bright,  
And lovely as a Lapland night,  
Shall lead thee to the grave.”

His early education had been necessarily limited; this through the years he sought to overcome with industry and varied applications. For he was possessed with the spirit of self-help and self-improvement. His saintliness was no sickly and unintelligent thing; neither his gentleness a species of intellectual weakness; nor his devoutness such as despises mental equipment and proficiency. He made no pretensions to any great attainments; but to those who knew him, his Greek and Hebrew Grammars and Lexicons were well thumbed. And he had a broad outlook upon men and things, and deep insight and visions of the things of God. He was a “workman who needed not to be ashamed.” In his private life he bore the fruits of holiness, and in his public work as a minister he won many from wickedness to godliness. '

For nearly three years he endured a most trying affliction; but he was the same noble spirit in suffering as he had been in toil. Labour brings its discipline; so does suffering. And many who can endure the hardships of active service, cannot brave the sufferings of afflictions. It is easier to work out God’s will than to lie in helplessness and suffer it. But our friend was so perfect in his consecration that he was the same patient and trustful soul in the years of feebleness, as he had been in those of active service. This long season of affliction was cheered by the filial devotion and loving concern manifested by the whole household, of his son and daughter-in-law, Mr. and Mrs.

E.C. Rawlings, of Hammersmith, to whom he had become their *household saint*, and to whom his memory is blessed.

At the beginning of the autumn of 1894 it became evident that the night was fast hastening. For such as he it is not hard to die. To them there is no fear, for death has ceased to terrify - he has become the liberator, even the messenger which calls the weary to their home. On September 12, 1894, the end came, and the abundant toiler and long-sufferer went to his rest and recompense.

“The room was full of angels,  
And he wondered we could not see:  
That we couldn’t see their shining wings  
As they floated noiselessly  
Around his bed.  
The room was full of music,  
Beautiful music - he said:  
And he wondered we could not hear  
How the holy strains were stealing,  
How the happy songs were pealing,  
All through the hush and gloom  
Of the silent room.  
And just before the dawning,  
When the darkness of night was o’er,  
And the night of his suffering life  
Was ended for evermore.  
It was in the grey of the morning  
The angels bore his soul away:  
Beyond the prison bars,  
Beyond the fading stars,  
To the brightness of the day.”

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## References

*Primitive Methodist Magazine* 1903/565