Thomas Russell, the Dauntless

Transcription of Sketch in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by Grapho

“A man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost.” – Acts

CARLYLE once wrote when referring to the makers of history, “they were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense the creators of whatever the general mass of men contrived to do, or to attain; all things we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment of thoughts that dwelt in the great men sent into the world. The thoughts they had were the parents of the actions they did; their feelings were the parents of the actions they did; their feelings were the parents of their thoughts, it was the unseen and spiritual that determined their actions, these were the great facts about them.”

It is with such reverent feelings that we think of the sires of our church, of whom we correctly speak as its makers and creators. They had an all-controlling sense of the invisible and spiritual. They saw

“The mysteries which circle under
The outward skin and shell of daily life,
They believed the promise of to-morrow
And felt the wondrous meaning of to-day.”

They were thus not the victims of the changeful visible, but were dominated by a simple faith sublime, and so bore unflinching witness to the truth.

Now none, of all whom it has been my joy to know among our Denominational Fathers, answer to this description more than Thomas Russell.

He was a man to whom God was no figure of speech, but the eternal and present fact. Religion to him was no poetic sentiment; but the supreme thing of life. And his ministry was no mere vocation; but the sacred cause of God’s light and truth against the Devil’s falsity and darkness, a cause to be fought for and won. He, like the heroic brotherhood to which he belonged,

“Had the inward surety, to carry out
A noble purpose to a noble end,
Although it be the gallows or the block.”

He was born at Middlewich, in Cheshire, December 21st, 1806. When he was only a child of tender years his father died. But the mother was a woman of no common qualities; she rose above her
sorrow bravely, and thriftily faced her responsibilities, and her children were blessed in her. Thomas had the invaluable legacy of a good physical constitution - a capacity and disposition for work - an indomitable will, and a deep love for goodness. And when the hour of surrender to Christ came, and the ordination to service arrived, these supplied the grand conditions of a beautiful sacrifice and the possibilities of mighty toil.

When he was twelve years of age he went with his mother to the first Primitive Methodist prayer-meeting held in Middlewich. It was about this time that Hugh Bourne preached in the neighbourhood, and Thomas Russell went to hear him. The message on “The New Birth” brought with it conviction, which, subsequently, in a class-meeting, blossomed into conversion. When but eighteen years of age he became a local preacher. He preached his trial sermon at Congleton. He speaks of this attempt as “a heavy time;” however, it was the beginning of a ministry, the success of which the preacher himself, perhaps, never dreamt of. He had a strong desire to be more intimately acquainted with the Bournes, and in 1827 he removed to Bemersley, that this end might be attained. He says of this period - “Here I had rest, and greatly delight the conversation and prayers of these blessed men of God, who had accomplished so much by establishing a camp-meeting cause. We often journeyed together, and I was much edified and strengthened in the things of God by their advice.”

At Bemersley he remained some eighteen months, and to him it was a wonderful season of communion with these kindred souls, and a rich preparation for the task to which he was soon to be called.

“No man is born into the world, whose work Is not born with him; there is always work, And tools withal, for those who will; And he who waits to have his task marked out, Shall die and leave his errand unfulfilled.”

From the hour when Thomas Russell was converted he was fired with a passion for usefulness; and in serving men for Christ’s sake, it soon became evident he was to find his life-work.

During his stay with the Bournes he not only had the opportunity of spiritual culture, but the long preaching tours, sometimes extending to thirty and forty miles, would be a rare time of discipline for the days of hardship which were to come for him. It was about this time that Tunstall circuit was stretching out its borders. And the officials had decided upon a mission in Derbyshire. They had been for some time acquainted with Thomas Russell, and his fervour and devotion were the credentials which justified their choice as to the man to be sent.

So, on May 26th, 1829, he started on his mission. Brandside, near Buxton, in Derbyshire, was his first appointment. Here his labours were diversified and exacting. On Tuesday, June 29th, about five
o’clock in the morning, he left Bemersley for Brinkworth, walking forty-three miles the first day to Darlaston, then to Tipton, then to Worcester, then to Stroudwater, and on to Brinkworth.

To this sphere he went with an oppressive sense of weakness and responsibility, so much so, that twelve months passed before he had courage enough to send for the luggage he had left behind him, fearing that he would never require it there.

This was a season of great depression to him; the work was so vast, so real to him was his responsibility, and so engrossing his solicitude for souls, and the indifference and opposition he met with so appalling, that we can in part, at least, understand his dejection. Did not even the great missionary apostle once say “Who is sufficient for these things?” and did not the Prophet of Fire have his dark hours of discouragement? It can be, then, no surprise that lesser men sometimes share a like despondency. It may be less a lack of faith, than a morbid fit of self-depreciation, or the result of temporary physical exhaustion.

Thomas Russell was made of better stuff than yields to disquieting thoughts, and traitorous feelings. He may have never known that Lowell wrote, but the same spirit stirred the evangelist and poet alike:-

“The trial still is the strength’s complement,
And the uncertain, dizzy path that scales
The sheer heights of supremest purposes
Is steeper to the angel than the child.
To the tough hearts that pioneer their kind,
And break a pathway to those unknown realms
That in the earth’s broad shadow lie enthralled;
Endurance is the crowning quality,
And patience all the passion of great hearts
And faith in God their stay.”

From Brinkworth he removed to Berkshire; here a mission six months previously had been commenced with very scant encouragement. Mr. Russell began his work at Lambourne by preaching in the open-air. A man who was present requested him to go and pray with his aged mother. He went and prayed and sang. While he was singing, a man fell down convicted of sin; others came in and the power of God arrested them; several were converted on the spot, and there and then a class was formed - the first Primitive Methodist class-meeting in the county of Berkshire. This was the beginning of a grand extension; classes were formed in several villages, and as the fruit of the first quarter’s work forty-eight members were enrolled.

Thomas Russell was pre-eminently a home-missionary, and it is to be questioned whether he has a superior in the list of our Church’s valiant ones in the pioneering work of the early years of our history. For forty-five years he laboured with an energy almost apostolic. Many of his exploits were really marvellous, and have the charm of romance about them. Some of the places he missioned, and where he planted societies, often in the face of the cruelest persecution, are now strong and useful centres of work. Those years of Thomas Russell’s’ ministry were the period of the heroics of our Church, the heroic years when our Church swept the country from county to county with a
sadly-needed Evangelism. Our fathers had neither prestige nor power which come from men, but they had the call and presence of God, and these were their credentials and strength. They had God's truth for men's errors, and the freedom of Christ for their bondage. And what to them were difficulties?

“O Truth! O Freedom! how are ye still born?
In the rude stable, in the manger nursed!
What humble hands unbar those gates of morn
Through which the splendour of the new day bursts.”

In those chivalrous years our sires were fortified in conscience impregnable. Others were vassals of custom and slaves of form, but they were free to serve where men most needed help; they waited not for opportunities, they made them; they went not where they were most welcome, but where they were most resisted.

We marvel as we trace the course of Thomas Russell’s remarkable career, both as regards its heroism and extent. The area it covered is really astonishing, - Tunstall, Brinkworth, Berkshire, Birmingham, Preses Green, Weymouth, Stroudwater, Bristol. St. Austell, Guernsey, Jersey, Stockton-on-Tees, South Shields, Darlington, Lisbon, Donaghmore, Portadown, Grassington, St. Albans, Berkhampstead and Dover. After labouring at Dover for two years it was evident that his work was done, and in 1874 though not without some protest on his part, he was superannuated. He had done a brilliant and crowded day's work, and had earned a calm eventide.

It was two years before his retirement from active service that we had the opportunity of making his acquaintance. We see him now, and nothing more fitly pictures him to our thoughts than the poet’s description of the redoubtable Miles Standish.—

“Short of stature he was, but strongly built and athletic,
Broad in the shoulders, deep chested, with muscles and sinews of iron;
Brown as a nut was his face, but his russet beard was already,
Flaked with patches of snow, as hedges sometimes in November.”

His quaintness often made us youngsters smile; and sometimes his oddities of manner and speech provided amusement for us; but we always knew how real and sincere he was. The old fire was in him, and he never tired in recounting the old battle scenes, never wearied in seeking to kindle in us the spirit which made the old days so famous.

Addressing us young ministers once, he exclaimed, “If I were forty years younger I would make Gabriel blush.” The same resolute determination - the same sacred soul-passion at white heat - the same unquenched ambition for God - the same keen and brimming love for work as in the days long since passed, were there. The memories were ever green, of faith and reverence and holy daring which a thousand dangers daunted not, and a thousand hardships could not make to falter. Of such men as Thomas Russell it is well said:-

“They think
What others only dream about, and do
What others do but think, and glory in
What others dare but do.”
Thomas Russell was a man of prayer – of faith and labours; yes, and of successes - for the total of members reported during his ministry was upwards of 3,000. In all his difficulties, his shelter and strength were in prayer. The hardships he faced in missioning Berkshire are almost incredible, and of this period he informs us “that he and Mr. Ride met for consultation as to their plans; they held a prayer-meeting in a cottage at nine o’clock till eleven, then they walked out towards their several spheres of toil; but ere they parted they turned into a wood, notwithstanding it was a winterly February morning, again to pray, and there remained for hours praying for Berkshire.” Then in the realism of faith Mr. Russell rose from his knees, exclaiming, “Brother Ride, yonder country is ours, and we will have it!” while his companion replied, “Hold fast, I like your confidence.” And who can doubt that our position to-day in Berkshire, and that spell of confident praying are inseparably associated?

He knew, as few know, the keen hunger, the long journeyings, the scarcity of friends, the fever smitings, and the hard lot. But it was the “treadmill” experiences which crowned his shame and suffering for Christ. On Friday, May 6th, 1830, he went to Chaddleworth to preach. He was met by the village constable, who ordered him to go with him to the magistrate. On arriving at the hall of justice he was severely cross-examined by clergyman and magistrate. He was offered his freedom if he would cease to preach in those parts. Upon refusing to comply with those terms, they imposed a fine of £10, which he refused to pay. Thereupon the constable took him behind him on his horse to Wantage, some seven miles distant. There he was committed to prison with hard labour for three calendar months. The next morning he was removed to Abingdon to undergo the sentence. The work at the hand-mill was even more severe than that of the treadmill, and it was at the former that he was put to work. The food was scant, the humiliation of prison dress and discipline galling, and often the taunts cutting; but Thomas Russell was made of the material which shrank not to suffer for his Master. He did not suffer in silent submission, nor with dejected sullenness, but like the premier Apostle, “he gloried in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake.” And that prison at Abingdon was made like the prison at Philippi to ring at midnight; with praises.

“For,” says he, “often at midnight I sang:—

“My soul’s full of glory, which inspires my tongue:
Could I meet with angels I’d sing them a song;
I’d sing of my Jesus, and tell of His charms,
And beg them to hear me to His loving arms.”

This event, as we scan it in Mr. Russell’s journal, reads like romance, and is one of the most heroic pages of our Connexional records. It well deserves a place in the heroics of missionary experiences generally. Thomas Russell was not only suffering in the interest of Primitive Methodism, but he was one of the champions in the larger cause of Gospel freedom against Ecclesiastical intolerance, and of salvation’s charter against social oppression. He is one of the host who has won for us the freedom to worship God, and widely to publish His message of love. Like many another of his dauntless brotherhood,

“There he stands in memory to this day
Erect, self-poised, a rugged face, half seen
Against the back-ground of unnatural dark,
A Witness to the generations as they pass,
That simple duty hath no place for fear."

Even after his superannuation he continued to labour as opportunity allowed, and to the last manifested an undiminished interest in the work of the church he had loved so fervently, and served so prodigally. Towards the close of 1888 he showed signs that the long day was fast hurrying to the sunset. On Jan. 3rd, 1889, he was seized with syncope, and suddenly expired. Almost the last words intelligently spoken by him were:-

“Through the telescope of faith,
I look o’er the river death,
And can sing with latest breath,
Heaven’s my Home.”

His remains were conveyed from Dover and laid in Englesea Brook Cemetery, near to the tomb of Hugh Bourne whom he loved so devotedly, from whom he had learned so much, and with whom we doubt not, he now rejoices. With his death one of the links was snapped which associated the early days of our Church’s exploits with the present generation of workers. They were giants in those days.

“Let us draw their mantle’s o’er us
Which have fallen in our way,
Let us do the work before us,
Cheerily, bravely, while we may.
Ere the long night-silence cometh,
And with us no more ’tis day!”

References
Primitive Methodist Magazine 1903/203