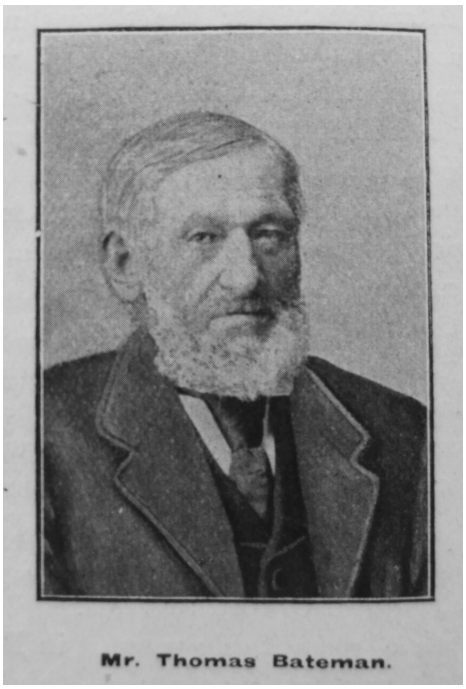
Thomas Bateman, The Steward

"*A man full of faith, and wisdom, and power*." – Acts.

Transcription of Sketch in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by Grapho



Mr. Thomas Bateman.

It is sometimes said that our Denomination is a "Layman's Church." And this is correct in some aspects without a question; but when it is said with an open, or a covert, design to disparage and discount the ministry of our church, the intention robs the assertion of much of its truthfulness. It is a fact beyond all dispute that we had our origin in the consecrated labours of Laymen. They were our founders, as a denomination. They drew up our constitution, and from the beginning have formed the most numerous factor in our church's life and action. All this is readily and thankfully recognized; but the ministry has had its place and power, and so intimately and organically related are these two factors - lay and ministerial, that to the wise there is not the least room for mutual suspicions, and rivalries. Every minister was once a layman, and every useful layman is an unpaid minister. Every noble-minded layman thinks of his minister; as one of himself relieved from business life to serve the church's interest with individed energy. And every broad-hearted minister gratefully thinks of the laymen, as his advisers and co-operators; sharing with him the care of the churches, and supplying his deficiencies and limitations of time and opportunities. Some of us look back across the long years of service in our church's ministry, and earnestly thank God for the many laymen who have so unstintedly helped us in every sphere where we have toiled. And our churches can never sufficiently honour the memories of those in the past whose labours have become inwoven in our history; nor adequately be thankful for those who to-day are aiding in shaping the future by their generous services. Long is the list of our honoured laymen; as a church, and not merely because of his early connections, but because of his prodigious labours - administrative skill, and wide and potent influence, we do not hesitate to put on the top of the scroll, Thomas Bateman.

He was born on October 29th 1799, at the Frith, Wrenbury. His father was a farmer and land surveyor. The family removed to Chorley in the year 1800. The parents were strict Church people, and the children were nurtured within the pale of the Established Church. Educational advantages were few in those days, and Thomas Bateman, in common with the many about him began life not over-stocked with learning. His opportunities were scant; but he possessed a thirst for knowledge - an indomitable will, and the genius of industry, and these were a compensation for the absence of advantages. The midnight hours invariably found him at his books. He knew the value of the spare moments, and coined them into riches. It was amid his farm work, and that by dint of his own personal diligence, that he laid in his mind, the by no means insignificant store of general knowledge, and secured an intellectual discipline - a mastery of facts - a grasp of details - a habit of analysis and synthesis in thinking, which were to be of such invaluable service to himself, and others

in the coming days. In those years of toiling - doubly toiling - on the farm by day, and at his books by night, he may not have been like the one whom Whittier describes when he writes:-

"For while he wrought with strenuous will
The work his hands had found to do,
He heard the fitful music still
Of winds that out of dream-land blew.
The din about him could not drown
What the strange voices whispered down;
Along his task-field weird processions swept,
The visionary pomp of stately phantoms stepped."

But of this we may he tolerably certain, those were formative years, and whether he was conscious or unconscious of the secrets of those years of drudgery he was being girded and equipped for a mighty service.

As a youth he was so shy, quiet and retiring that many thought him to be anything but brilliant. He was considered generally, as weakly in intellect, as he was frail in body, however, one man read the youth better than most people, and spoke thus encouragingly to him - "Thou'll be a man and open somebody's eyes when I am dead and forgotten."

It was during these early years of his life that he came under the influence of two poor, but godly men whose names were respectively Capper and Cook. It was in the year 1807, when Thomas Bateman was but eight years old that Mr. Cook took his young friend to visit Mr. Capper who was prostrate with sickness. That was an occasion all-determining in the life of young Bateman. There were these godly men - one a Churchman and the other a Wesleyan - talking with such freedom and oneness concerning the deep things of God; absolutely oblivious of the differences which distinguished the outwardness of the forms and creeds their churches stood for. And there sat the boy Bateman, apparently unconcerned, and to all appearances unimpressed with what was transpiring; but the influence of that conversation left an enduring mark on the youth's mind. For long after that he wrote thus of that night-scene in the sick room -
"A new light sprung up in my mind, and a strong conviction took hold of me, which changing scenes, and rolling years have not yet worn away, that real religion, whether at Church or Chapel, is the same thing the world over-.To the conversation of that night I ascribe those liberal principles which I have ever felt towards Christians of all denominations." Soon after this event Mr. Capper died, and in 1811 Mr. Cook passed away to his reward, and thus Thomas Bateman was left, almost like a sheep, without a shepherd. However, he continued to attend the Wesleyan Chapel, where his friend Cook had taken him; but no one took any notice of him.

About this time he heard of the strange doings of Bourne, and Clowes, and their companions. It was on Easter Sunday, 1819, that John Wedgwood was announced to preach at Bulkeley, and he was asked to go and hear him, which request he refused. Sometime after this Mr. Wedgwood preached on Chorley Green; it was a time of mighty awakening, and the fruit of that service was the formation of a Primitive Methodist class, which subsequently he joined, and afterwards became its leader. He had now found the place where he could get the fellowship he had for years yearned for, and here was the starting point of that prodigal usefulness which characterised the years which followed.

When Thomas Bateman became a Primitive Methodist, the denomination found a unique and remarkable personality, and the man discovered an equally advantageous sphere for the unfolding and exercise of his many and varied gifts – a sphere most suited to his temperament and talents - scope for the operations of his restless energies, and immense capacity for work; and the denomination gained a man, such as it needed, and has never ceased to need, a man of ideas and resourcefulness, and withal a man of unsparing energies, and of unstinted labours, a combination which ever makes a place for itself. Primitive Methodism was but some nine or ten years old when Thomas Bateman became one of her sons. It was sweeping the north of Staffordshire like a prairie-fire. It was simply the new evangelism with its over-brimming and erratic enthusiasm. It could scarcely be called a Church, hardly had it deserved the appellation of an organization. It had no constitution - no Conference; but some five or six chapels at most, if we can call those modest structures chapels, which were our first fixed stations and centres at that time. It was merely a band of men and women who carried God's message of love to the neglected, as far as their means and opportunities allowed. Such was the unformed and unshaped condition of our Church when Thomas Bateman became a member. And how much he was to contribute to its moulding and consolidation, neither he nor any one of the times, perhaps, guessed.

Thomas Bateman was a man of unique personality. As a child he was anything but physically strong, and as a youth he was reserved and retiring, even to the point of dulness in the judgment of many who knew him. However, in him was capacity. In him, slumbering, were vast energies and remarkable possibilities, tarrying on the threshold to be harnessed to some great task. He is described as "a man somewhat above the middle size, just fairly covered with flesh, with rather a dark complexion and very penetrating eyes." There is the man from the outside. Nothing very striking, perhaps, to a casual acquaintance, but the qualities were there which were to make him distinguished and valuable to our Church to an unmeasured degree.

He possessed a keen and alert intellect - remarkable business sagacity and aptitude - a calm and dispassionate judgment – an inflexible conscientiousness - an indomitable will, which sometimes betrayed itself into over-bearingness and severity - an intense devotion to his God, and loyalty to his work - a broad catholicity of spirit and of principle which raised him above a mere sectary - and a fearlessness of thought and speech, and sometimes of manner, which not unfrequently hid his better and worthier qualities.

He early became acquainted with the founders of our Church. And Hugh Bourne soon discovered his worth and abilities. The two men, possessing much in common, became closely allied in the most intimate friendship. Hugh Bourne found in Thomas Bateman not only a friend, but a counsellor and advisor. Those first years must have been a time of considerable anxiety, especially to Hugh Bourne, for the Connexion was rapidly extending, and he needed cool and sagacious comrades in whose judgment he could trust, and in whose counsels he could find assistance. And Thomas Bateman was just such a one. He possessed great practical talent – a legal mind and a store of legal knowledge, which were of exceptional value, when, as yet our polity was unshaped and our denominational Deed Poll was unprepared. We are assured by those who claim to know - friends still living in the classic regions of our Church's history - that the making of our Deed Poll was as much the work of Thomas Bateman as it was of Hugh Bourne. The proportion of representation - the two-to-one in our principal courts - was the suggestion, it is declared, of Thomas Bateman, who shared with Hugh

Bourne a dread of ministerial authority as of clerical tyranny. But Thomas Bateman was not only a man of striking personality and of rare gifts; he was a man of abundant and varied labours. And this fact is all the more remarkable and exceptional, as he was a business man. During the lifetime of his father he toiled on the farm, and at the death of his father in 1833 he assumed the entire management of the business; still never relaxing his labours for God. For over fifty years he had but few Sundays free, and took an average of three week-night meetings. Sometimes he would walk forty to fifty miles to preach, taking his food in his pocket, or going without, as friends and homes were scarce. People who heard him preach with such power little fancied how he contrived to do his farm and business matters, and the terrible sacrifices he, and the wife at home, were making, so that he could serve them. He arrived home at all hours from his preaching appointments, and no matter how late the hour of reaching home, or how weary with the long walk, he was up and out on the farm before four o'clock in the summer, and before five o'clock in the winter. For nearly forty years he was Connexional auditor, and in every possible way served the denomination generally, as well as his own and surrounding circuits for ordinary and special work.

But this is by no means the extent of his labours, and influence. None could question the staunchness of his Nonconformity; nevertheless he always lived on the kindliest terms with his Churchmen neighbours. He became treasurer of the parish when his father died, and held that position till his own death. Through his efforts the money was raised to secure an additional half-an-acre to the parish burying-ground; and he subsequently collected to complete the set of new bells for the Church. And with others, deeming the clergyman's income inadequate, he helped to collect £1200, and purchased a small farm the rent of which goes to the clergyman. He was elected a member of the Nantwich Board of Guardians in 1834, and was for many years vice-chairman, refusing repeatedly to accept the honour of chairman.

His capacity for work was enormous, and was always in exercise amid the many duties of a business life, and often while experiencing great physical weakness. His love for his work exceeded both his care for his own health and business; or even his solicitude for his family. It is said that shortly after his marriage he had an engagement to open a new chapel some fifty miles from Chorley. He had been ill in bed all the week, the doctor said it would be death for him to attempt to leave his room. However, on the Saturday morning he drove his young wife to the market, five miles away, and expected to get the coach to the town where he was announced to preach on the Sunday. When the coach came up every seat was occupied. Nothing daunted he started, and walked thirty miles. In the middle of the night he lay for two hours on a hard wooden couch at Newport; then rose and pursued his journey, fulfilled his engagement, and returned home to the surprise of his friend, better than when he started.

As he loved his work more than he did health and home, so he loved it more than he did worldly gains. It is said, "he and another friend commenced business as manufacturers, and merchants, which soon became most prosperous. But he found it demanding more time than he had expected, and was absorbing the time he had hitherto given to God's work, so he withdrew from the concern: the remaining partner some years ago died worth more than a million sterling. Work for God with Thomas Bateman was a passion; this stood first in his thoughts and affections, and he permitted nothing to dull the voice which called him, nor to divert his eyes from the hand which led him on. 'Twas as if he was always feeling, if not saying:-

"Apart from Thee all gain is loss,
All labour vainly done;
The solemn shadow of Thy Cross
Is better than the sun."

As we have only hinted at the many-sidedness of his usefulness, so we can but briefly mention some of the many instances of the almost universal esteem in which he was held. In 1864 the parishioners of Wrenbury made him valuable presents for his long services in the Parish. In 1871 he attained his jubilee as a local preacher, and his circuit and friends presented him with an illuminated testimonial, and seventy-five guineas. In 1883 he celebrated his golden wedding, and the Connexion presented him with an oil-painting of himself and Mrs. Bateman. And last, but not least of the many recognitions of his worth, our Conference in 1857, and again in 1867 elected him to the honour of President. - This speaks much for the esteem he was held in by the Connexion in those days.

Thomas Bateman was no common man, and it was no ordinary and common-place service he rendered to his generation. He was not without his faults, no doubt. Some men's faults are the fruits of their viciousness; while the faults of others, are the defects of their excellencies, and Thomas Bateman belongs to the latter, not to the former category. Sometimes he was accounted severe and over-bearing; but how much these can be traced to his imperious will and inflexible conscience? By some he has been thought to have possessed strong anti-ministerial feelings, and was ever ready to resent the very appearance of any ministerial encroachment on the layman's liberties. But alongside such imputations let us set the fact of how much some of our old fathers had suffered from ministerial insolence; then even such a fault may not be so glaringly heinous as would at first appear. With such men as Thomas Bateman their excellencies and sacrifices a thousand-fold atone for their defects; and, perhaps, they themselves are the most conscious of them, and suffer and sorrow most on their account. It is said that to a minister who visited him in his last illness he confessed "he had sometimes been hard and severe with his brethren, but he had always meant well." He had grown old and infirm in service, and it was evident in December of 1896 that the end was nearing. He often exclaimed, "My work is done," and he frequently repeated:-

"Oh, that without a lingering groan
I may the welcome word receive.
My body with my charge lay down
And cease at once to work and live."

The end came February 2nd, 1897. The long day of toil was finished, and to the faithful servant's recompense he passed. The Connexion never had a more devoted son; and among the tens of thousands of our honoured and self-sacrificing laymen, our Church will ever give Thomas Bateman, of Chorley, a premier position in her memory and gratitude.

References

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