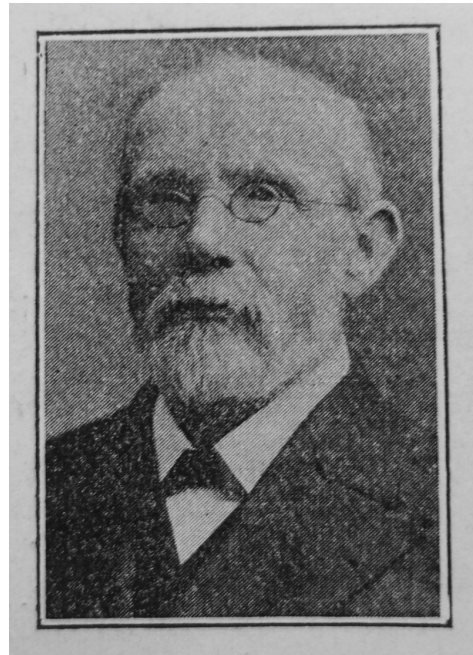


Featherstone Watson

Transcription of Obituary in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by R.C.

From the time that Joseph Grieves - converted at Westgate in 1824 - entered the ministry in 1826, Weardale has sent a constant succession of men into our ministerial ranks. Most of them have done well; some of them exceptionally so. Among the many able men so supplied for the service of the Church, few have done the Dale greater credit or done better work than our beloved brother Featherstone Watson.



Mr. Watson was born at the small village of Burtree near Wearhead, October 24th, 1844. Close to his birthplace the River Wear, there a mere stripling, plays its youthful gambols over the ledges of its rocky bed. Down below stretches the fine valley of the Wear; while above tower high mountains, covered with blooming heather or capped with snow as seasons come and go. About him were people kindly, devout, strenuous. Changes may have taken place since the advent of the railway and the discovery of the Dale as a summer resort. But in Mr. Watson's youth Weardale was very much self-contained, and offered a fine field for the growth of individuality. Had Ian Maclaren been about then he could have found splendid subjects for his facile pen, not without a good deal of his native Scotch. We mention these things because we know from like conditions how powerfully nature and the people with whom he associates, shape a boy's life. Wordsworth knew it all and has finely expressed it in the words:

"Love had he found in huts where poor men lie;
His daily teachers had been woods and rills,
The silence that is in the starry sky,
The sleep that is among the lonely hills."

To his mother Mr. Watson owed much every way. He had inherited much of her temperament; and his father dying when he was but four years old, widow and son shared a common loss, and became bound to each other by closest bonds of affection. She was a member of our Church as had been her parents. Referring to her in his sketch of Mr. Watson, which appeared in ALDERSGATE, November, 1903, the Rev. W. A. French says, "Her gentle spirit and unpretentious piety made her life fragrant as a rose, and produced a profound impression on her son." Hard as it seems that Mr. Watson's school days should end, and that he should commence to work at the early age of nine, we can readily understand how the hardship was lightened by the aid, however small, he was thus able to render his mother in the up-keep of her family.

This meek and inspiring home influence combined with the enlightened and earnest labour of his Sunday School teacher, Mr. J. Harrison, led to Mr. Watson's conversion at the early age of eleven. That he should have kept his ground says much, alike for himself and the shepherding he got. But

even then he was a typical Dalesman, with a habit of digging at the roots of things. As a class they may be somewhat slow of movement, and not easily driven beyond their convictions. But once get them to make the great surrender, you have got something worth having, and something that has come to stay.

His conversion opened a new era – an era of mental improvement. At seventeen he became a local preacher, three years later was recommended for the ministry and diligently sought to prepare himself for his life-work.

What was then the old Sunderland District had at its service a group of the most powerful ministers in the Connexion. Some of these were stationed in Weardale during the formative period of Mr. Watson's life. At the same time popular ministers outside the district were making their annual visits to the various Churches in the Dale. Taking note of dates we find that about the time Mr. Watson was made a local preacher Weardale was doing a creditable and unique thing in calling the Rev. John Watson, D.D., to labour as junior minister on his home station. To Dr. Watson our friend was much indebted, as under his guidance he was led to an acquaintance with Butler, Wayland, Mansel, and other authors.

The late Mr. George Race also was then in the zenith of his fame and power in the Dale. What Mr. Gladstone was to Britain Mr. Race was to Weardale. Too great to be proud he was easy of access and students found in him "friend, philosopher, and guide."* Under the auspices of Mr. Race, a library, founded by a few working miners a hundred years ago, had so grown that in Mr. Watson's time it contained thousands of volumes of the best English literature.

Of all these helps Mr. Watson gladly availed himself. Yet when the time came for entering the ministry he felt deeply his inadequate equipment. Elmfield College was about to receive its first batch of students. Eagerly did our friend desire to avail himself of the facilities offered, and went so far as to send his fee. But, to his disappointment, the Conference sent him direct into circuit work.

The stations on which Mr. Watson laboured were Guisborough, Stokesley, Newcastle-on-Tyne, Thornley, Middlesbrough, Shildon, St. Helens Auckland, Westgate (his home station), Staithes, Middleton-in-Teesdale and Stokesley for a second term.

On all his stations he did good work, and left behind a record of devoted and successful service. All through the thirty-eight years of his ministry he was known as a modest, painstaking, hard-working minister. No official position was allowed to interfere with what was due to the people among whom he was located. He spent himself freely for their good, and was welcomed to their homes as a brother beloved. He was an ideal superintendent. Nothing escaped him. The smallest details as well as the larger interests of his stations commanded his constant care. And all was done with such an entire absence of fuss and friction. John Wesley said, "Though I am always in haste, I am never in a hurry." How true of Brother Watson!

He read widely, giving special attention to "Biblical Exposition, Theology, philosophy, history, and the choice classics of English prose and poetry." The findings of the Higher Critics were known to him, but no criticism, higher or other, shook for a moment his faith in the Divine Word. He knew whom

he had believed, and no joy to him was so great as the joy of proclaiming to men the unsearchable riches of Christ. His sermons, like all he did, were carefully prepared and were lucid expositions of the Word. A vocal defect, somewhat disagreeable to his hearers at first, was soon forgotten in the gracious personality, the clear and accurate thinking, and the deep spirituality of the man.

In the work of chapel building his labour must have been great. On one station alone he had to do with the erection of five places of worship. In this line his best bit of work was done on his last station. When he returned to Stokesley in 1902, he found a circuit with some strong outside places, but helplessly weak in Stokesley itself. The membership was small, the chapel poor and badly situated. He secured a commanding site, and then, contributing generously himself, he appealed for assistance outside with the result that in a short time a beautiful chapel and school were built at a cost of £1,100, with only about £300 remaining as debt. At the same time he was busy erecting an excellent manse charmingly situated.

There was something appropriate in all this, as a kind of return for a great boon which, in a sense, the station had bestowed upon him. When Mr. Watson closed his probation he took to wife Miss Rachel Bainbridge, eldest daughter of Mr. Isaac Bainbridge, Ingleby, Greenhow. She was a member of one of the most excellent families in the Stokesley Station. In disposition and training she was in every way fitted for the place she was called upon to fill. In entire sympathy with her husband's life and work, she rendered unstinted service in all the stations on which they laboured and contributed not a little to the success of his ministry.

Mr. Watson was no eager aspirant for official position.

But nothing could prevent his brethren in the two districts in which he spent his life from discovering that they had in him a strong man with large acquaintance with Connexional law and usage. They knew, too, that whatever official work was put into his hands would be well done. In District Meeting he was once Chairman, once General Committee Delegate, and three times Secretary. Thrice he represented his District in Conference. He was for ten years District Sunday School Secretary, and at the time of his decease was Building Committee Secretary.

Deep regret was felt throughout the North of England when it became known that on May 5th, 1904, Mr. Watson had succumbed to a virulent attack of pneumonia. Few knew except in his immediate circle that for a fortnight he had been struggling with this fell disease, and his death came as a shock to many. To those near him little fear was entertained of fatal result until near the end. He died as he had lived, calm and trustful, his last words being "Jesus is precious," "God is good," and "Until the day dawn and the shadows flee away."

The funeral took place on May 9th. The service was conducted by the Rev. Charles Humble, of Hartlepool. The Rev. Robert Hind represented the General Committee, and he and the Rev. W.A. French gave appreciative addresses. Others who took part in the service were Rev. Wm. Bowe, Rev. Emerson Phillipson, Rev. T. Barron (Wesleyan), and Rev. B. Dennison, and Mr. Humble read the service at the grave. Other ministers present were Revs. William Shipley, William Younger; J.G. Bowran, Jacob Walton G. Chun, Martin Cuthbert, J. F. Sherman, Edward W. Challenger, Arthur W. Bagnall, John P. Osborne, John Taylor, William Gelley, Charles Pettler, T.J. Watson, Richard

Ainsworth and J. Thomas (Congregationalist). There were also, in addition to the officials of the circuit, a large number of laymen from neighbouring circuits, who came to accord their tribute of respect to his worth.

A large number of letters sent to Mrs. Watson on her husband's death express high appreciation of his worth and work and convey sincerest sympathy with Mrs. Watson, her daughter and three sons. Some of them are from young men – ministerial and lay - who were led by him to give themselves to God, or had been generously helped in their studies, Reference is also made to the fact that Mr. Watson, alone in the town in which he lived, amid much to make him pause became a Passive Resister.

*We are pleased to say that Mr. Race is worthily represented by his son; who has not only inherited his name but many of his highest qualities.

References

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