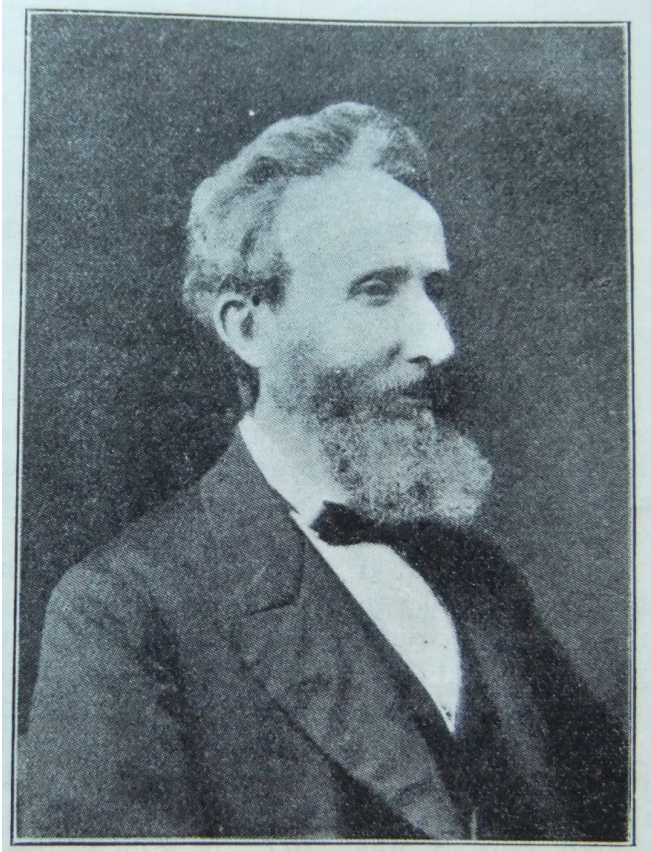
Transcription of article in the Christian Messenger by H. Bickerstaffe Kendall in a series ‘Preachers of Thirty Years Ago’



REV. COLIN CAMPBELL M'KECHNIE.

There can be little doubt that, to Primitive Methodists, C.C. M’Kechnie holds a place apart. We prefer to put the fact in this way rather than to say he is our greatest man. That statement would be crude and, without due qualification, untrue. Let us not be spendthrifts with our superlatives. Yes, “an unchallenged place apart," is better. Why it should be so is an interesting question, and the answer does not lie quite as close to the surface as may be thought. We suspect, if an inquiry were pursued, we should in the end come up against the conclusion that Mr. M'Kechnie’s admitted eminence and high reputation at bottom rest, not so much on any one single quality he possessed, as upon a rare combination of qualities; and that the man himself was somehow greater than anything he did or said. His was the sort of greatness that makes itself felt and puts forth power, though itself is too elusive for either the scales or measuring rod.

We can judge beforehand of the type of preacher Mr. M'Kechnie was from the man who influenced him in the formative period of his life. The late Henry Kendall of Darlington records a conversation with Mr. M’Kechnie on August 3rd, 1892, when the latter, speaking of the influence of mind upon mind, and of how that influence is often conveyed through conversation, went on to say: "I remember a conversation with James Watson, which had a great effect on me, not so much through what he said, as through a sort of electric force which it exerted." In his MS. Autobiography he dwells at length on this epochal interview. What struck him most in James Watson was " the disciplined force of his mind. He was eminently and specially a man of intellectual power.” In his presence he was both humbled and stimulated. The record is valuable, for a man’s admirations are indirect self-revealings.

It was in 1867 that the writer, then in the third year of his probation, was, largely through the influence of Mr. M'Kechnie himself, put down to be the third preacher of North Shields Circuit, of which he was the superintendent. I had met with him several times, and once or twice tasted the trying experience of preaching before him. But now l was to know him as never before. I soon discovered that in my super I had to do with a dynamic personality. One could not call at the manse on a simple matter of business, or walk with him to an appointment, or join him at a friendly table, but the dynamo was still playing. It seemed never to be at rest. You had to play up to it, or sink in your own estimation and in his—which was worse. For instinctively one felt that if the super were capable of scorn, it would be for mental sloth or for those who were lacking in moral seriousness. When Coleridge once said interrogatively to Lamb: “Charles, you have heard me preach?” the Lamb-like answer came with its delicious stammer: “I n-n-never heard you d-d-do anything else! " In a

sense this was true of Mr. M'Kechnie. Unless a man were irresponsive as a miller's sack, Mr. M'Kechnie would in his way be preaching to him, and in so doing expressing and clarifying his own ideas. Especially was this the case when young men came well within what we might call the range of his personality. He made them think, which was what he set himself to do. He helped them to grow their wings on if they were already full-fledged, he helped them to mount a little higher into the empyrean of truth.

In thinking of a man such as Mr. M'Kechnie was, you feel it quite impossible to limit yourself to pulpit terms in describing him. If we have at all succeeded in conveying our first and latest impression of him, this should need no proof. He was so constituted that, what it was his business to do in the pulpit, it was natural for him to do all the time. So he was a great talker, a good talker, and by that we mean he was a talker for the good, the true, the holy. So, as our fathers put it, he was a "conversation preacher," as Socrates was, aye, and as Christ was. His talk was not on low levels. If his interlocutor would keep it there, he had no more to say. It pleased God that the influence that Mr. M'Kechnie undoubtedly exerted upon those who in their turn were to influence others was largely exerted through conversation, and not merely through his pulpit ministrations. Especially was this so during the last twelve years of his active ministry in the old Sunderland District, when he was in the maturity of his powers and approaching the zenith of his influence. He was a dynamic man, whether standing in the pulpit, or sitting by the study fire with only one or two to listen. William Arthur once said that Christ preached at Jacob's Well to "a congregation of one." True, emphatically true, in the sense intended, and in that sense C.C. M'Kechnie was a great and effective preacher; and this fact must be allowed its due weight and significance as we try to put into words our estimate of the man. It may be that some who did not know Mr. M'Kechnie in his prime—and that, be it remembered, was fifty, and not thirty years ago—may have an uneasy feeling that the man we are describing was, as someone said of De Quincey, "an intellectual creature " of a fine, uncommon type; one who would not much care for those who would not meet him on common ground—the unintellectual, the uneducated, the poor, the wretched; and that, if he did care for them, he would be unable to reach them. There could not be a more groundless misapprehension. It may be that Mr. Robert Foster was right in holding that, while from his father Mr. M'Kechnie inherited that critical temper which was characteristic of him, he did from his mother, who came of a true Highland stock, inherit that Celtic spiritual passion and unshakable trust in the Unseen which qualified and balanced the cool, logical intellect, and kept the daring speculative flights in check. Certain it is that it was this wholehearted acceptance of the Unseen with all it implicates that was basal in the man. To change the figure: he was securely anchored, but he swung freely at his anchor. So he had sympathy and spiritual passion, and could kindle and grow excited at a Camp meeting and feel at one with the poor because, in the very poverty of their condition and in the slenderness of their mental equipment and store, the things that mattered the most to him were in their case the more clearly to be discerned. If we want to know whether culture and evangelism can really go well together, we have only to watch Mr. M'Kechnie's movements in the great Revival which took place in the North Shields Circuit in 1867-8. How he worked and revelled in it! And that was but one of a series of revivals which marked and gladdened his ministry. There were revivals at Sunderland and Stanhope, and above all, there was the Allendale Revival, which has become historic. No; culture and evangelism are not incompatible with each other.

I find I have little room left in which to speak of Mr. M'Kechnie as a pulpit preacher. Nor does it greatly matter; for, as we have already suggested, he preached in the pulpit much in the same way as he conversed out of it. His philosophic cast of mind, his imaginative power, and above all, his

underlying spiritual sensibility and passion went with him into the sacred desk. His sermons were not constructions, but, as a frequent hearer of Mr. M'Kechnie once said, they seemed to grow up before you like a tree, unfolding part after part, no part redundant or misplaced, but altogether composing an admirable unity in diversity. "Poor -------! " said he to the writer once, speaking of a certain young preacher he heard—"his sermon seemed as if it had been raked together like a heap of stones." Mr. M'Kechnie's sermons were not stone-heaps, but living trees. Sometimes he failed; but even then the tree was there, though not so tall or symmetrical, or as luxuriantly covered with verdure as usual. He could afford to fail occasionally, better than most men, and sleep well after it too. The man who never fails seldom succeeds. He was not sparing in natural gesture and facial expression, and sometimes his frown was terrible to behold. At his best, when he had a congenial theme, like "The Dwelling-place of Wisdom," to hear him was a treat fit for a king.

References

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