

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

"And let me beg you to be quick about it, sir, for ministers are soon forgotten." So said Dr. W. Hamilton (himself now, we fear, but a shadowy figure) as he put into the printer's hands the manuscript of his *Life of John Ely*. Yes! "ministers are soon forgotten." There can be little doubt about it. The saying, with its half-mournful cadence and its pithiness, has almost passed into a proverb. This is hardly the time to inquire why it should be so — though the inquiry is an interesting one. This much, however, may be said: ministers as a class may not after all fade from memory more quickly than do men of other classes. It is equally true of poets, authors and politicians, that they too, with a few rare exceptions are soon forgotten. All alike are "carried downward by the (lethean) flood and lost in following years. "In the case of ministers, however, who live much in the public eye, who go in and out amongst men, whose voice, good to listen to, often stirs the feelings to their depths, who become familiar figures, and as such are much talked about whether for good or ill— when they quit the scene of their activities it almost seems to a reflective mind as though they were "carried downward" by a swifter current than other men into comparative oblivion. Be this as it may, ministers, even those who were men of some mark in their day, are in danger of being forgotten, so that it becomes almost a pious duty to recall them and their work to remembrance.

I think that Thomas Southron, with whom it was my privilege to labour as a colleague on the North Shields Circuit for three years, is one of the ministers of our Church of a former generation who is in some danger of being forgotten; and I do not think he ought to be; for he was a man of "mark and likelihood." So far as the printed page is concerned one cannot be blind to the obliscent process which is evidently going on in regard to him. The signs of this vanishing process are all too familiar. True, Thomas Southron's name is still to be found in any list of the notable ministers of the North in the 'sixties and 'seventies of last century; but almost invariably it is the name alone that meets the eye—the mere name without any circumstance. There is the attribution of no special quality belonging to the man; no particular deed is assigned to him which of itself served to mark him out from his fellows and gave him his title to remembrance. We are glad, however, to know that the printed page is not everything "for remembrance," any more than the epitaph on a tombstone is the only custodian of the memory of the dead lying beneath it.

"We have no need of names and epitaphs;

We talk about the dead by our firesides."

There must be a good many ingle-nooks in the North Country where, even yet, the talk still turns on Thomas Southron. The old man in reminiscent vein will begin with the usual exordium : "I mind well when Thomas Southron travelled this circuit." And then to his more youthful listeners he will give some personal trait of the preacher; how he had "an eye in his head like a hawk's, and was sharp as a needle"; or he will go on to retell some anecdote, perhaps the famous one of how once, when on the platform, he turned his back on the congregation to tell the Chairman - Henry Phillips ("him that was President, you know") what a fine-looking gentleman he was ; and how Mr. Phillips was "no-way taken aback" but "quietly smiled like in his face" and said: "Sorry I cannot return the compliment, Mr. Southron!" "Man, you should have been there; the hoose nearly cam' doon!" But in the ingle-talk there will be sure to be more than the recalling of oddities—of quips and quirks. "He was a high-larnt man, was Mr. Southron, and, my certes! he could preach! He would mount up and up on the wings of his fine language like a skylark, and then, whiles, he would look over the book-board and say 'We will not dwell on that; You must think it out for yourselves.' Aye, he was a grand man, was Mr. Southron, and we had grand times in them days."

We are pretty certain that this is no overdrawn, overcoloured picture of the traditions still finding voice in the villages of the Old Sunderland District where all Mr. Southron's ministerial life was spent. We are confirmed in this opinion by having come across some reminiscences of the early life of the Rev. J. Lawson Forster, D.D. which, as we gather, was spent in a mining village some eight or ten miles from Sunderland. In 1903 the D.D. had not forgotten the Sunderland Primitive Methodist ministers—amongst them Thomas Southron—to whom it was a rare treat to listen in those far-off days.

“The monthly or quarterly visit of the circuit minister was regarded as a red-letter day in that little community; and on such occasions the Bethel was generally crowded to its utmost capacity. Strong and plain-looking men, with quaintly-cut, black, superfine coats and a huge expanse of white tie were the Primitive Methodist ministers of that day; but, in the pulpit, they were truly great, and seemed to carry everything before them—their oratory was like a whirlwind. Away from the restraints of town life and a higher form of civilisation and culture, these men ‘let themselves go’ in our pitmen’s Bethel on the moor, and preached for God and eternity. Such men as Thomas Greenfield, Colin Campbell McKechnie, Henry Kendall (afterwards a Congregational minister), and Thomas Southron, were among our angel visitants—men of a fair amount of education, of great pulpit power, and, at that time, in all the vigour of youth. The three last-named are now sleeping side by side in the beautiful little cemetery at Darlington.”

The worthy doctor's recollections and impressions of the past, by reason of the haze of time, may not be quite accurate in all points. “*Strong* and plain-looking ” as applied to some of the four might be challenged; and certainly “*fair* amount of education” are beggarly bankrupt terms to describe the education which all the four had been enabled to give themselves. But let that pass. The impression of their pulpit power is just; and that impression was abiding.

But in regard to Thomas Southron we must not end here ; something more needs to be said. He has claims to remembrance which ought to be historically recognised. We say nothing of the work accomplished in his Circuits during his long ministry of forty-one years. For this alone, as the Rev. W. Johnson has clearly shewn (in his admirable memoir of Mr. Southron which appeared in the *Aldersgate* for 1901) Mr. Southron should not be forgotten. But more than this, for two years at least he stood on the Conference minutes as Editor-designate; he was in the running for the Presidency in 1885, and but for the opposition of Mr. McKechnie, who brought forward Mr. Lamb for a second term, he would have gained that honourable position. When we remember that Mr. McKechnie himself wrote, “If ever there be a college, you (Mr. Southron) may consider yourself to be the author of it,” we find it hard to justify such opposition. Let us remember these things, and give to each man, though late, his meed of praise.

Twenty-two of Mr. Southron’s forty-one years of travel were spent on three stations. He gave three terms of service to both Shotley Bridge and North Shields, and five years he laboured in Sunderland. These facts speak for themselves. The shrewd, hard-headed officials of these important circuits knew their man. They had discovered that Mr. Southron had the root of the matter in him and could be depended on for the things that matter. It is true Mr. Southron had his eccentricities, and for these he had to pay the price. At times a sort of elfish, whimsical spirit would break out of him. But those who knew the man were no more disturbed by these coruscations of energy and fun than they would have been with the frisking of a kitten or the play of summer lightning. This, at any rate, is the judgment of the writer, who had three years close association with Mr. Southron. Now as he calls up that figure, all compact of alertness, with its flashing eye and lips that bespoke determination, he

can think of no better formula to sum up the man than that already given: he had the root of the matter in him. Time revises verdicts. Contemporary judgments based mainly on superficial peculiarities do not last. We can see now that Mr. Southron was, as the old phrase puts it—"sound at the croak " - a sound theologian, a staunch friend, a loyal Primitive Methodist minister.

References

Christian Messenger 1913/267