

Dr. John Wilson, of Durham

Transcription of Sketch In the Christian Messenger by Rev. John Graham

It was my fortune to be born and brought up in the North of England. As a consequence the names and exploits of the Northumberland and Durham worthies in the last three decades of the nineteenth century were well known to me. A little lad has ears. In the sixties, brave men were raised up to fight the battles of the pitmen, and bring order out of chaos. The two Miners' Unions of the two counties were formed. Nearly all the organisers belonged to our own Church, and many of them Local Preachers. They appeared in our village; to address meetings on weeknights, and had appointments to preach on the Lord's Day. These men were all capable. They had a mission. They saw a way through their subjects. As they spoke they seemed to hold the miners (many of whom were readers and thinkers) in the hollow of their hands.

My first experience of the Durham men was during a visit to the city in the early eighties for the annual Camp Meeting. There were five preachers, and alas! they have all gone beyond our ken. The Rev. Wm. Baitey conducted, and the four preachers each gave strong meat. Stephenson Stobbs harangued on "The Last Judgment," and addressed half the audience as "sheep," and the other half as "goats" (they sat and stood in two portions in an amphitheatre in Wharton's Park) in a perfectly self-forgetful way. Henry Brown discoursed on "The Hidden Treasure," and seemed to be acquainted with all the gems on the globe. Richard R. Clish dealt with "Zaccheus," and gave most amusing particulars concerning the height and weight of that New Testament tree-climber. Robert Hind came last with a sermon on "The Fatherliness of God," based on two words of St. Mark: "And Peter." Certainly there was shining eloquence that day. Messrs. John Wilson and Wm. Crawford were present, and the latter took us all home to tea. At the table the talk turned to books. Mr. Henry Brown made a memorable remark. He said it took Bishop Butler twenty years to write the "Analogy of Religion," and that no man could add or subtract a word to its improvement! Little did one of the small party realise at the moment what the wrestling with Butler would mean in after years. The "Analogy" used to be a text book for probationers. The winds of Heaven blew through it. It was a grand mental and spiritual tonic. In one of our long-ago Conferences a delegate remarked that if a young minister did not master Butler in two years he was lazy. The Rev. John Atkinson jumped up and thundered: "Mr. President, I have been grappling with Butler's Analogy for thirty-two years, and I have not mastered it yet."

Gradually I came to know the Durham Miners' agent, Mr. John Wilson, as he then was, with intimacy. His name stood on our plan; nearly every quarter he came to our Sacriston to preach. According to kindly custom I was invariably invited to take tea with him. Happy are these memories. Mr. Wilson edified the pitman-host with his sagacious table talk, was a perfect gentleman to his canny pit hostess, and never forgot the little bairns. He really had some black bullets in his pocket. After the night service one or two lads set the preacher home to the city. What profitable walks! John Wilson was a well-read man, and in those days, lads - as indeed in all days - were like sponges. If John Henry Newman - afterwards the famous cardinal - learnt the doctrine of the Apostolic Succession in the course of a walk round Christ Church meadow with William James it would be very hard to say what some Durham lads learned on the north country roads many years ago. They got fine lessons on Homiletics, Church History and Theology. Mr Wilson was a born teacher. He had

fought his own way through the tangled thickets, and knew the difficulties. He had a discerning spirit and was a great encourager. He could see the chicken beneath the shell. One often marvels at the good man's patience and kindness. He must often have been wearied with his journeys and sermons, but he gave no sign of it. His "Good-night" was a benediction. Next morning it seemed easier to go below into the darkness of the mine, and the eleven hours servitude was not so sour.

In that period it was something of an ordeal for a pit lad to preach in the Jubilee Chapel, Durham. Those formidable Miners' Agents and M.P.'s were all there. Who can measure the sweat of preparation? What tales could not the squirrels of Foldfoot Wood tell of the reciting of the sermon? The father's anxiety - the solicitude of mother! There sat the M.P.'s. They looked and listened. They could bear and forbear. They were infinitely kind. After the service they would linger on the chapel-steps, and what they said was music. Perhaps all that may be explained by the fact that no cabbages are so sweet as those we help to grow ourselves.

The annual demonstration of the miners was a big event in the days of which we speak. At least fifty thousand people assembled on the race-course in the city from every corner of the county. On the four or five platforms appeared speakers of national and international repute, and Primitive Methodist orators would shine among them. Joseph Arch was there. Charles Fenwick was there. Thomas Burt was there. It made the heart jump to hear Wm. Baitey and Robert Hind there for were they not our own ministers? Mr. John Wilson was busy on such days. He had duties most exacting and onerous. But he never passed an old marra from the pits without a crack. He never failed to help a bewildered old pit wife across the crowded street. He never missed a shy pit lad in the surging crowd, or failed to invite him to call next door the Miners' Hall in the North Road before going home. There he introduced the untutored lad to the great men from the House of Commons, and encouraged him to sit amongst them. Tears of gratitude spring to the eyes at the remembrance of such kindness. In all complete men is great simplicity as well as great humour. As Tennyson said so beautifully of the foremost captain of his time:

" Rich in saving common sense  
And, as the greatest only are,  
In this simplicity sublime."

Dr. John Wilson's simplicity, and therefore his greatness, were manifest in his home. Everything was neat and orderly, and spotlessly clean, The fare was the ordinary fare of a pitman's home, served in true north country fashion. On the walls hung portraits in oil of Gladstone, Chamberlain, Hartington, Bright, Dilke and even old Dizzy. And the books! There were always books. All over the house books. The genial doctor was a genuine bookman, and had eclectic tastes in regard to books. He never returned from London without a parcel of books. As well might the train never come north as bring no books. He knew how to give them away too. He realised it was a good investment to give a book to a lad fond of reading. Time never withers, custom never stales that most excellent device.

Dr. John Wilson was an *edition de luxe* of the sturdy, intelligent, northern miner. He wrought his mining comrades lasting good. He was a Social Reformer. He was a Christian philanthropist He was the *confrere* of English statesmen. He was the friend of English bishops. He enjoyed the acquaintance of American millionaires. He won the respect of Presidents of the great Western

Republic. He was the cicerone of the Queen of England when she visited the homes of the Aged Miners. But he was never intoxicated by being brought into contact with the great. All through his long life he was loyal to our Church, and served her in many ways. It is a great glory that our Church helped to mould such a man, and gave him opportunities for the exercise of his varied gifts. A wise man in our midst, says we are a people rich in many ways; This testimony is true. Our sons and our daughters in the Church are our jewels. Dr. John Wilson was one of our treasures.

#### Reference

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