Hugh Gilmore

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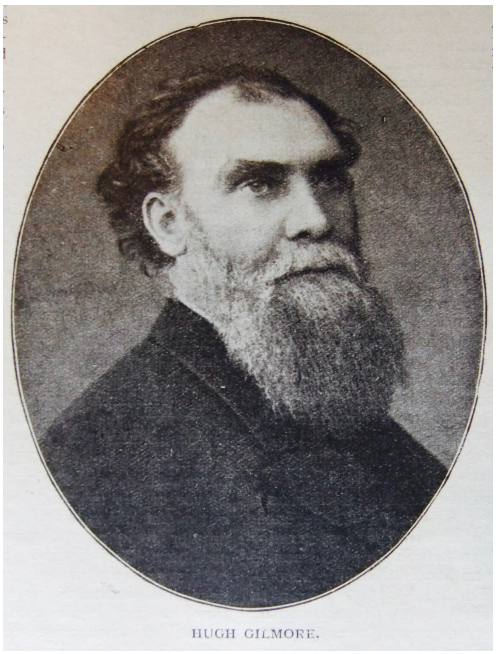
HUGH GILMORE.

HUGH GILMORE was the most brilliant member of a famous trio. If neither a great administrator like John Atkinson, nor a profound thinker like William Graham, he far outshone them both as a public speaker. And yet he was not at all the typical platform orator of the time in which he appeared. The star-spangled rhetorician of the period was anathema to him. He might be said to be out to kill that sort of thing, and before the end of his brilliant day it had disappeared. In some respects he was a blend of his two distinguished colleagues. Though not a trained or exact theologian he was something of a philosopher, and if not an exact thinker he possessed extraordinary mental grasp. In the denominational sense he was as one "born out of due time," and had no sectarian ancestry to fetter, not to say steady, his course. A man who at the outset of his religious experience, was under the necessity of laboriously spelling his way into the meaning of the simplest forms of current religious phraseology, was likely to strike out a path of his own and perhaps form for himself a terminology somewhat *caviare* to the general. But such were his popular gifts that he could capture an audience that might have been expected to be incapable of understanding him, and, as a master of assemblies, sway it as he willed. A notable example of this was at the Tunstall Conference of 1884. Gilmore was appointed to preach at the great Camp Meeting. It was a very wet day and the service had to be held in the chapel. The preachers were allowed ten minutes each, and the sermons, as so often happens with an indoors Camp Meeting fell flat. But Gilmore that day was a "live wire." From the first sentence to the last he electrified the congregation. But it was unlike any Camp Meeting sermon they had ever heard - full of hard thinking, close reasoning, direct appeal; and the application, picturing a fisher-woman on the East Coast who had lost her boy in a storm and was in agony about his spiritual destiny, was the finest thing of the kind I ever heard.

It will be easily understood that preparation for a man of this type was concerned with thoughts and ideas rather than words. He would come down to a great meeting with a few points jotted down on a sheet of paper. The result might be a great popular triumph or a fiasco. He preceded me on the Blyth Station by only a few years. Blyth at that period was a big circuit, of big strong men a trifle yeasty with a vague idealism both religious and democratic. Already Gilmore had become a legend. His great times when, like some oratorical tornado he swept everything before him; his bad times when the whole thing was a confused "hash" ending nowhere – both were fresh in the memory of his friends. But his directness of speech, his pawky humour, his droll stories, his delightful accent, lapsing now and then into "braid Scots," his wide human sympathies, his great-heartedness and his unconventional ways, all served to invest him with an irresistible attraction. He could make these big strong men laugh till they cried. And a man whose early years had been spent in the streets of Glasgow, who had never known father or mother, who had been dragged up as a street-Arab whose only amusement was the ha'penny Geggie, or on the material side, the fun of "nabbing a rooster"

and roasting it in a ball of clay at the brick-kilns; who ran away when a bottle-maker's apprentice to Liverpool, and when cruelly robbed of money that was to have taken him to America, tramped to Newcastle, where coming under the influence of Primitive Methodism he got soundly converted and ultimately found his way into the ministry – such a man could hardly fail to light up his sermons and addresses with many a thrilling incident and many a startling phrase. Upon the pitmen of Northumberland he came as at bewildering surprise. They had imagined nothing like him. No wonder they took him to their hearts and to the end of their days would recount his amazing exploits. Thomas Burt, so "canny," yet so keenly intellectual, fell under Gilmore's spell, and told me long years afterwards of the man's marvellous mental grasp and popular gifts.

During these years he was reading widely, and trying to find his feet. Many a sermon and many a speech was an attempt at formulating some new conception of truth which as yet he had imperfectly grasped himself. Hence the "hash" he would sometimes make of it. Coleridge and Burke and Wordsworth, Burns and Shelley, Gladstone and Bright were among his heroes. Not till he moved to Weardale, and then Darlington, did he come into his kingdom and the fruit of his reading and thinking began to fully appear. In Weardale he found hard-headed, thoughtful men who with this blended a rare spirituality, association with whom served to give him something akin to a new religious birth. In Darlington he found a great popular forum from which he exerted a unique influence that made him one of the best known and best loved citizens of the Quaker town. I have walked with him down the principal street of Darlington when every second person doffed his hat to the Primitive Methodist minister. Greenbank Chapel is his finest monument and lifted our cause at once into a new position. But in addition to that spacious and beautiful building, occupying one of the finest sites in the town, a suitable memorial inside the church commemorates his work and worth.

But it was the Newcastle Conference of 1876 that made Hugh Gilmore a Connexional celebrity. There he won his spurs alike on the floor of the Conference and on the platform of the great Monday night public meeting. I heard him in both arenas. He took a notable part in the debate on the extension of the Connexional franchise, and was at once recognised as a force to be reckoned with; and from that time the Conference knew him as one of its doughtiest debaters. Perhaps his greatest triumph was at the great public meeting in the Town Hall, where he delivered one of those distinctively intellectual yet popular speeches which, within the next few years, established a new vogue in our Connexional oratory. From that hour he leaped into fame. Invitations poured in upon him from all parts of the country for sermons and lectures. To a friend he said he was positively ashamed when he contrasted the expectations that had been awakened and the poor figure he was bound to make in actuality. But his fame grew and spread all the same.

His work as a journalist had its share in making him a Connexional man. Reporting the debates and speeches of Conference devolved mainly on the other two members of the trio. That could not have been a congenial task to Gilmore: but he was very much at home in writing descriptive sketches of the proceedings. He was never keenly interested in the ecclesiastical side of things. It was the human and religious aspect that attracted him. Personal incidents, amusing anecdotes, touches of humour would be seized and transferred to his department of the Primitive Methodist Conference issues. The atmosphere of the Conference, its broader human sympathies, its personnel could be gathered better from his lightning sketches than from any prosy verbatim report. He had a tolerant temper in

thus appraising our Annual Assembly. I remember once expressing disappointment at the tone of the Conference on the question of overlapping in its bearing on the question of some future Methodist union; but he thought this a mere sign of denominational loyalty and in no way indicative of a lower personel. There was no mistaking his hand In these sketches - although now and then a note would come from the other members of “Alofus” and even from an outsider like myself - and our people all over the land were eager to hear this virile speaker and writer.

But his name was becoming familiar as a writer before the Newcastle Conference. Even then few numbers of the *Ambassador* appeared without an article from Gilmore’s pen. Immediately on Mr. McKechnie becoming Connexional Editor, “H.G.” began to write extensively for the magazines; and if, as the Editor averred nearly twenty years later, his contributions helped much to sustain and advance the reputation of the Quarterly they did no less for the other magazines from 1876 onwards, and incidentally for the author’s Conexional repute. His serial stories, “Up and down,” “The Black Diamond," "Alick Morrison,” contained not a little of his own early experiences imaginatively presented, while his “Spiritual Revealings,” in the *Large Magazine* were strictly autobiographical. Unlike other popular lecturers a new lecture of Gilmore’s would go almost at once into print which meant that its platform vogue would practically cease. But then another lecture would at once come to birth. Many of these lectures were full of close, severe thinking. I remember hearing his “Modern Doubt,” launched on the occasion of the opening of our Heaton Road Chapel, Newcastle-on-Tyne, and anything more unlike the popular lecture of the period could not be imagined. But this was scarcely typical; he could be as broadly humorous in lecturing as in platform speaking. But always there was great strength and solidity. No other man would have ventured to deliver so weighty a lecture on a similar occasion as that just referred to.

His early experiences and his temperament tended to make him the champion of the poor, the oppressed, the suffering. “He was consumed by a zeal for humanity, by an uncompromising opposition to class privilege, and by a desire to raise humanity to a high plane of intellectual, moral, and as far as possible, social equality." Yet with all this he was opposed to the Churches as Churches being directly associated with politcs. Precisely where he would have drawn the line to-day is a moot point. He understood the poor from bitter experience and his sympathy was strong and passionate. He knew nothing of the rich in the same way, and was perhaps incapable of understanding their temptations.

A born preacher, Hugh Gilmore at his best was overwhelming in the force and power of his appeal. He lifted his hearers out of the old ruts and sent them away with ampler horizons and a more masculine conception of Christianity. If, in all the novelty of his presentation of truth and the freshness and vigour of his exposition of Scripture, he came upon men in this country as a bewildering surprise, he startled even more the Colonials in South Australia. He captured them from the highest to the humblest in less than two years. Adelaide was profoundly moved – first by his life, and then by his death. His name became a household word; and when he died at forty-nine, in the fullness of his powers and the floodtide of his influence, he was mourned as none had ever been mourned before. He hoped to return home, but his work was done. His sun went down while it was yet day, to rise in unsullied splendour in another and happier clime.

References