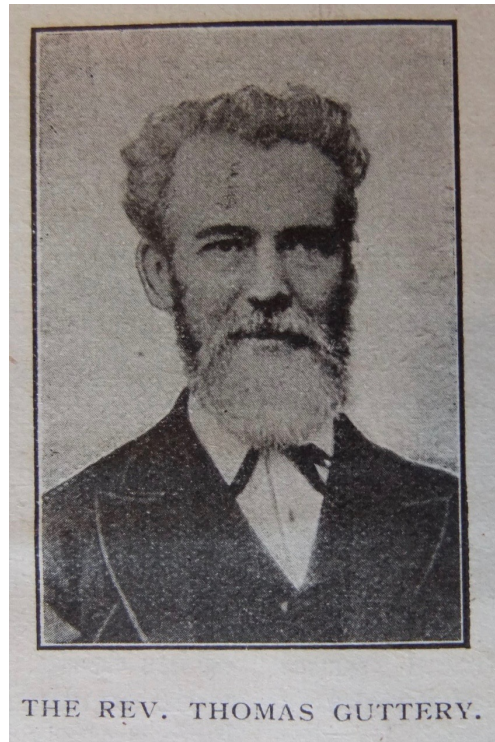


Thomas Guttery

Transcription of Article in the Christian Messenger by Rev. Joseph Ritson

THROUGHOUT his ministry Guttery enjoyed an immense popularity. For years he was one of the orators of the denomination, and held multitudes in the thrall of his eloquence. In the arts of popular speech there were many giants in those days - Dr. Joseph Ferguson, who knelt at the same penitent form as Thomas Guttery; Philip Pugh, of a slightly earlier generation; William Jones, of just a little later; and others little less famous. James Travis and and Hugh Gilmore were almost equally popular, but their oratory was of a different type. Thomas Guttery was the popular lecturer *par excellence*. Crowds gathered wherever he was announced, and he lectured all over this country and a great part of Canada. In stature he was a little over the middle height; his figure rather slight; the head well developed, especially in the frontal regions; the face pleasant and rather handsome, and bearded and moustached as was the mode. The dark hair was a little rebellious and impatient of control, like its owner. At any rate he had a great hatred of every species of tyranny, and fought valiantly on the side of reform in Church and State. Subjects like General Gordon, and London in its darker aspects, appealed to him powerfully and to the crowds who flocked to hear him. Biography in any form he handled with a masterly touch. His sermons on the patriarchs and prophets were long remembered by those who were privileged to hear them. On the platform his dramatic gifts found free play; so much so that the critical-minded were disposed to regard him as too much of an actor, and to doubt his perfect sincerity. That is a criticism always levelled against a man of supreme popular gifts, justly or unjustly. Great histrionic ability is perplexing to natures more matter of fact and slower of mental and physical movement. Some counted him greater on the platform than in the pulpit, but a hearer so cool and critical as Dr. Peake was filled with wonder and delight as he listened to this distinguished pulpit orator at his best on a Conference occasion. Thomas Guttery was indeed a master of assemblies.



His gifts of speech, of memory, of imagination, of vivid, forceful phrase, all suffused with spiritual fervour and passion, made him irresistible. Characters as dissimilar as Livingstone and Cardinal Wolsey and General Gordon were made to live before his audiences. A series of imaginative pictures were seen by him so clearly, and so vividly described with silver-tongued eloquence, that they became living and real to his hearers. Do any of our young ministers to-day win such swift and extraordinary popularity? Do any of them possess such fervour and unction and passion, such fascination and witchery of speech as young Thomas Guttery from the very beginning of his ministry? He began in a region where such gifts were enjoyed in fair measure by a considerable number of his brethren. Oswestry, Tunstall, Dawley, Birmingham, Leominster, Shrewsbury, Wolverhampton, formed a theatre, so to speak, calculated to stimulate all the gifts of popular

speech any young man might possess, and through these circuits he went like a flame of fire. Even Tunstall, the mother circuit of Primitive Methodism, never had a station like Philip Pugh, Thomas Guttery, William Jones. The imagination thrills at the thought of such a trio of the masters of oratory. I only heard Philip Pugh once, when I was a boy at Elmfield, but the memory of his magnetic speech lives with me still. In his abounding vitality and spiritual magnetism he was constrained to say that he had twenty years in him yet. The next thing I heard he was dead. There may have been something a little over-jewelled in the oratory of William Jones, whose greatest ministry was afterwards exercised as the Superintendent of Tunstall Circuit; but there was a touch of genius in it all the same, and he was mighty and eloquent in extreme old age. He was an appreciative hearer one afternoon during my presidency at a place where he was himself preaching morning and evening, and his talk over the tea-table was delightful. And Thomas Guttery stood between these two giants, and exercised a brilliant ministry on the magnificent salary of £38 a year. Graciously he was permitted by the Quarterly Meeting to purchase a book-case at a maximum price of ten shillings, and to have one Sunday a quarter *sometimes* for "foreign" engagements! The competition for these four Sundays a year would undoubtedly be tremendous; but the Quarterly Meeting, which regulated these peripatetic oratorical excursions, would remorselessly turn them down one after another. At Wolverhampton, in 1868, he had advanced to the princely salary of £76 a year, and a house rented at four shillings and ninepence a week. These were the days of Spartan domestic discipline when oatmeal gruel would sometimes take the place of butcher's meat. It needed some Connexional loyalty to refuse an offer of £400 a year from another Nonconformist Church. Such was the passion for the "beloved Connexion" in those days that such offers were no temptation.

But the Conference itself stepped in to give the popular young minister a wider circuit than any in the old country. In 1871 he was sent to Canada. Technically he might be the minister of Alice Street, Toronto, but really he had the whole Dominion as his station or parish, and for eight years he wielded great influence both with voice and pen. As the Editor for seven years of "The Christian Journal," the organ of the denomination in Canada, he served an apprenticeship which would undoubtedly have qualified him for the editorial chair in London, to which he was afterwards designated, but never privileged to occupy.

Returning to England in June, 1879, he at once entered upon a new era of popularity preaching and lecturing all over the country. To meet the many demands his services the Conference allowed him a year without pastoral charge, at the end of which he became Superintendent of Tatham Street, Sunderland, where he was immensely popular not only as a preacher and lecturer, but as a leader of Liberalism throughout the North. From Sunderland he passed to Caledonian Road, London, then the most influential church we had in the Metropolis; next to Southport, where he built a new church, returning in 1894 once more to Sunderland. Here a great ministry was interrupted and then closed by the terrible malady of cancer of the liver. His son, Arthur presided at the June Quarterly Meeting, but the stricken father passed away on the 14th of the month and in the fifty-ninth year of his age.

Reference has been made to Thomas Guttery's designation to the editorship, which was in 1892. He was thus at the time of his death within two years of becoming a Connexional officer. His biography of William Clowes, so full of insight, pen-portraiture and literary deftness, had, apart from his wide popularity, not a little to do with this appointment. But it was not to be. The Conference, then in session at Edinburgh, heard with profound regret of his death. A minister of unique gifts and wide

popularity was suddenly smitten down by a malady that still baffles all human skill, and at the same age as his gifted son afterwards died.

Thomas Guttery is still remembered in all the spheres of his wonderful ministry. He was so potent a personality, compact of mental and spiritual energy, with the gift of thrilling speech, great tenacity in debate, and power of personal persuasiveness, that he seized men's imaginations and commanded their allegiance in a wonderful way. He played a great part in the division of the great Northern District. The change was probably inevitable and, in the main, perhaps beneficial, although Dr. Dalton, who took the same side, is now of the opinion that the loss has been greater than the gain. To have played a leading part in two continents, and won his way to all but the highest positions of his Church – and these would unquestionably have been his had his life been spared – argues the possession of qualities of mind and heart of no common order. His name and fame have been kept green throughout the denomination by the marvellous achievements of his son, Dr. A.T. Guttery, whose biography also will perpetuate the character and work of his father and mother. Mention ought at least to be made of the valuable service rendered by Thomas Guttery as the Secretary of the Candidates' Examining Committee. Although thirty years have passed away since then, the writer has a vivid recollection of the devotion and enthusiasm with which this work was performed. However splendid the gifts of the orator, a new generation knows them only second-hand and in a vague way. But many still recall the eloquent speech of Thomas Guttery as a thing standing apart and never to be forgotten.

References

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