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Contributors and Correspondents

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE OF THE LATE REV. DR. THORNTON OF OSKAWA.

The subject of this notice died of pneumonia, after a few days illness, at Oshawa on Thursday morning the 11th February, in the 69th year of his age, and 42nd of his ministry. Thus another of the pioneers and standard bearers of Gospel truth in Canada, under the regimental banner of Presbyterianism, has been suddenly called from the field by "the Captain of Salvation" whom he served so long and so devotedly. The worth and work of the deceased merit a much more extended notice than the columns of your paper can well afford. It is hoped that the following jottings by one who had the privilege of his acquaintance and friendship for forty five years, will not be without interest to his brethren who know him, and to the thousands who have more or less frequently listened to the gospel message from his lips.

Robert H. Thornton was born in April, 1806, in the Parish of West Calder, near Edinburgh. His parents were eminently godly. They belonged to the Yeomanry of the land, a class to which Scotland has been largely indebted for men of general intelligence, stalworth principle and decided piety, and who have done much to "make her loved at home, revered abroad." His father, Peter Thornton, of Muirburn, was an elder in the secession church of Cambusnethan. The piety of his partner, the mother of Dr. Thornton, was notable and hereditary. In a foot note of a pamphlet published in 1848 in connection with the centenary of Cambusnethan church, the writer, the Rev. Mr. Scott, says: "When I remember this young minister's mother, (Dr. Thornton's), Agnes Smith, and grandmother Elizabeth Dalziel, who were women of singular piety,—Lois, Eunice, and Timothy, are the invariable associations. Such a pious parentage was a high privilege; for their is implied a priceless heritage, obtained by divine promise, to the "third and fourth generation" in being the "seed of the righteous." From a child he knew the Holy Scriptures, and daily witnessed in the home of his youth the blessed fruits of faith in the Lord Jesus. His early and life-long piety testified to the importance of having a Christian home-circle in youth. The instructions and godly conversation of believing parents are potent means of grace to their children. This is more especially the case as regards believing mothers. Their winning and continuous counsels, their holy walk, their loving reproofs, and their earnest prayers, are to their offspring what dew, and genial rains, and sunshine are to the tender plant. When vital religion consecrates a mother's love—"the warmest love that can grow cold"—how benign the effect on her family! Were all mothers real Christians, the world would soon be converted to God. The blessed results of parental piety were seen in the Thornton family. All of them, we believe, served God, in their respective spheres, and all save one have "fallen asleep" and are no doubt inheriting the promises. Robert, the third son, and of whom we write, early set his heart on the ministry of the gospel. The more elementary parts of an excellent education he received in his native parish. When about fourteen years of age, he removed to Falkirk, where his eldest brother kept a flourishing educational seminary, and there he acted as assistant to him, at the same time prosecuting with commendable zeal his classical studies preparatory to entering college. Not only at Falkirk, but in the localities where he resided during his student life, he enjoyed no ordinary advantage in sitting under the ministry, and being favoured with the friendship and fatherly counsel of superior men, such as the Rev. Mr. Scott of Cambusnethan, whose excessive modesty obtained from the outer world great talents and worth, and that faintly man, the Rev. John Brown of Whitburn, father of the better known Professor John Brown, D.D. of Edinburgh, and grandfather of John Brown, M.D., author of "Rab and his Friends," a man of great genius, and of singular geniality.

In due time, and better qualified than any, Mr. Thornton became an alumnus of the university of Edinburgh, then as now distinguished as a seat of learning, numbering among its professors John Wilson, better known as "Christopher North," and Sir John Leslie, a Prince in the department of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy. Our young student, possessing marked intellectual acuteness and indomitable determination to acquire knowledge, took a most respectable place in all the classes he attended. Professor

Wilson, in his certificate says he was not merely "a regular and attentive," but a "most able student." His ardent thirst for knowledge is apparent from the fact that he studied several other branches, in addition to those included in the curriculum imperative on those preparing for the ministry. His acquirements in several departments of Natural Science enabled him in after life to do good service as a lecturer, on numerous occasions, to Mechanics Institutes &c. Attracted, we presume, by the fame of Dr. Chalmers, he proceeded to St. Andrews, and there prosecuted his studies for a time. In August of the year 1829 he entered the Divinity Hall of the Secession Church at Glasgow, then presided over by Drs. Dick and Mitchell, and for four years devoted himself assiduously to the study of theology that he might be "a workman needing not to be ashamed rightly dividing the word of truth." His high character and qualifications were attested by the fact that at the close of his fourth session at the Theological Hall (one session less than usual) the synod of the church saw fit to license and ordain him as a missionary to Canada. Before setting out for his distant sphere of labour, he was united in marriage to Margaret, daughter of Joseph Thompson, of Malenny Grove, near Edinburgh, a lady who in every respect proved a helpmate indeed. On the 8th of May, 1833, they sailed from Greenock, and after a tedious voyage of more than seven weeks, landed at New York, and reached Cobourg in Canada, early in July. From thence our young missionary went forth on his first evangelistic tour in this, then rough and sparsely peopled country. He directed his course westward, along the lake front, which was then in course of settlement. Did space allow, we would like to give in his own graphic style, an account of this tour which we find in a series of interesting articles contributed by him to the United Presbyterian Magazine, entitled "The Rise and progress of the United Presbyterian Church in Canada." The following extract must suffice:—

"With the exception of a narrow strip, far from continuous, along the Southern frontier, Canada was then a vast wilderness. Enterprising settlers had, indeed, in many cases, pushed their way many miles inland; but their "clearings" were so small, so "few and far between," as scarcely to interrupt the wilderness monotony. A few localities were here and there, even then giving promise of the future, in the widening grain fields, and increasing dwelling places, but such localities were separated commonly, by many miles of dense and dreary forest. And as for roads, with a few exceptions, they were yet in the future. The emigrant and the Missionary too, were at first cheered by hearing of certain lines of roads, in a direction they wished to move; but judge of the surprise felt, when the road was found as Nature's hand had framed it, and was "in all, merely by the cutting and partial clearing of trees which had covered its surface. To keep these few highways, such as they were, was incompatible with the objects of the Missionary, and the nature of the work. We had to wend our way through forest paths, and from clearing to clearing, where the only mode of locomotion was on foot. We had then, not only "no certain dwelling-place," but not certain field before us. And one of the greatest peculiarities of our condition was, that we had to "go forth" like Abraham, "not knowing whither we went." Avoiding everything like inroads upon the few localities where the Gospel had obtained a footing, by the formation of small churches, we proceeded in quest of Presbyterian settlers, without the least direct information as to where they were to be found, or whether we should be desired. Committing ourselves to God, we just advanced where he broke up our way. The first members of our Church in Canada were thus most emphatically "a people sought out;" long may she be distinguished as a "city not forsaken."

At the earnest solicitation of a number of Presbyterians in the Township of Whitley, Mr. Thornton made that locality the centre of his ministerial labours, but his diocese extended far to the east and to the west; and as far north as settlers of Presbyterian proclivities were to be found. No bishop could more assiduously seek out and tend his widely scattered flock. In a letter of instructions from the mission committee in Scotland, we find the following among a number of most judicious counsels: "Wherever you settle, your labours are not to be confined to the audience assembling in your stated place of worship, but you are to preach and exhort as often as possible at stations in the vicinity." With this as with all portions of their instructions, he yielded what may be termed an excessive compliance. He grudged no cost of time and toil in fulfilling his sacred commission. He did not confine his labours to the "vicinity" of his home, but "went everywhere preaching the gospel," in the several parishes bordering on Ontario. It may truthfully be said, that he was the father of all the now flourishing Presbyterian congregations in that whole district of country. Here we gladly avail ourselves of a letter, just received from John Kitchin, Esq., a much esteemed elder of the church at

Columbus, who was long and intimately associated with our departed friend in Christian work. Dr. Thornton's character and abundant labours are so well and cordially given, that we cannot refrain from inserting it, even without asking the consent of the writer, but we feel confident that both he and the readers of the PRESBYTERIAN will forgive us.

Columbus, Feb. 15th, 1875.

REV. AND DEAR SIR.—You ask me to give you some items connected with the life and labours of our dear departed friend and revered father, the late R. H. Thornton, D.D. Having been intimately acquainted, and in an humble measure associated with him in some efforts, for the benefit of the community, for more than forty years, I have great pleasure in complying with your request.

Dr. Thornton settled in Whitley Township in the Fall of 1833, (not 1834 as stated in the Globe), and from the first, he took a lively interest in all that pertained to the advancement of the community, in morality, in intelligence, in temperance, and in religion. At that time two Sabbath was far from being well observed by the settlers. But by his constant and earnest appeals to the conscience, he did more than any other man in the locality to stop the desecration of the day sacred to rest and spiritual enjoyment.

The free and easy drinking habits so common then in new settlements, found in him a constant and consistent opponent, and the cause of temperance a most zealous and powerful advocate. In every form, and by every legitimate means, he sought to abolish the drinking customs of the day. The idea of a public open air demonstration being mooted, two or three met with him; we named a committee, obtained the use of McGregor's Grove, about the place where the mansion of the Hon. T. N. Gibb's now stands, and called forth such an assembly as overtasked the capacity of the then small village of Oshawa, to ally their huager, though there was plenty of water to quench their thirst, and although a heavy thunder storm spoiled the closing procession to Whitley, such an impetus was given to the cause of temperance, that it was felt for many a day.

The cause of education early engaged the attention, and called forth the efforts of our departed friend. Long before any official legal enactment had put in operation the machinery whereby our schools have attained their present high standing, he, by personal instruction of those who sought to be useful, by lectures and by visits, and also by publishing a series of progressive school-books, did much to lay the foundation of our splendid institution of to-day.

But it was as a minister of the gospel that he was most honoured to do service for the Master. At the time of his settlement, there was no Presbyterian minister between Port Hope and Toronto, and when we take into account the state of the roads, and the hardship of travelling in those early days, we can only wonder that one who was not over robust, should have been able to accomplish so much. Indeed, it was remarked by some that the long rough rides over almost impassable roads, seemed to invigorate his thin slender frame, and to toughen his constitution. No state of weather or roads ever deterred him from keeping an appointment if horse or man could push through. Even when the roads were nearly bottomless, he was hardly ever behind the appointed time. His labours not only embraced the township of Whitley where there are now five Presbyterian Churches, but extended into the townships of Pickering and Darlington, where there are now numerous flourishing congregations. Indeed, without any figure of speech, he may truly be called the father of Presbyterianism in this region. Often in the new settler's log house, by the open wood fire in winter, or in the rude barn in summer did he proclaim with great familiarity the unsearchable riches of the grace of God. He often cheerfully shared the single roomed cabin of the hardy settler. One word with reference to the social character and manners of the Rev. Doctor, and I must close this meagre sketch. No man was ever more misunderstood by those who did not open their hearts to him. By such he was esteemed proud, distant, and cold in manner, when it was only a natural diffidence which he both felt and deplored, but which he found impossible to shake off. But to those who understood him, who opened their hearts and affections to him, he was the most cherished of friends, and his visits to them were seasons of rich and varied enjoyment. His genial nature attached him to old and young, and his stores of all kinds of knowledge furnished an intellectual feast that those who had once tasted tended to have repeated. In the home relations of husband and father he was most exemplary. The sympathy of feeling between him and his beloved partner was very close and tender, and the filial reverence of his children was inspired by his entreating freely and fully into all their joys and sorrows, and giving them the full tide of his great affection.

The community at large have lost in him one who has done more to mould habits of thought and springs of action, than any other single individual. A thorough scholar, with a strong will and firm principles, could not fail to influence very strongly those whose opportunities had not been equal to his, and whose time to attend to intellectual culture was limited by the pressing engagements of secular life. Many have been stimulated to intellectual exertion through his means, and many led to embrace the Saviour through his clear, logical, and faithful presentation of divine truth. "He rests from his labours, and his works do follow him."

Believe me to be, reverend and dear sir, yours faithfully,
JOHN BARCUFF.

The deservedly high estimation in which Dr. Thornton was held by the people of his charge, and by the community in which he lived, and for whose weal he laboured in various ways, was manifested very markedly on several occasions. In 1855, his health became impaired by excessive and continuous labours. His congregation and other friends generously, handed him \$620, that he and his partner might visit the land of their birth. Again, when he had completed the twenty-fifth year of his ministry in 1858, his much attached people, at a soirée given on the occasion, presented him with a congratulatory and grateful address, and also with \$200. The meeting was large, and the proceedings were of a very delightful character, as the writer can well remember. A number of brethren were present to rejoice with him and his people, and wish them a long and happy union.

From the time of his settlement he took a deep interest and active part in the promotion of education. There are few, if any in Canada, with the exception of the Rev. Dr. Ryerson, who have done more for the scholastic interests of the people than Dr. Thornton. For many years, and without remuneration, he was a painstaking superintendent of a large district of country. He was ever ready to teach as well as to counsel teachers. Many young men, now occupying prominent positions in the church and in secular vocations, were indebted to him for introduction, encouragement, and counsel. The teachers on several occasions showed their appreciation of his services, and of his self-denying labours on their behalf. In 1853, the teachers of the southern part of the county, held a large public meeting in his honour, at which many of the leading educationalists of the country were present, and on that occasion they presented him with a very flattering address, and a purse containing several hundred dollars.

He was forward in every good work. He was the apostle of temperance in that quarter from the day of his arrival, and was one of the most enlightened and effective lecturers on that subject so vital to the weal of the individual and the community. He was an instructive and acceptable lecturer, whether on religious, moral, literary, or scientific subjects. Hence his services were often held in requisition as such. His information was extensive and accurate, and his style logical, clear, and terse. Lucidity and point characterized whatever he wrote or spoke. In him the intellectual faculties predominated over the emotional, and yet he was possessed of keen and tender feelings, but in his discourses and conversation while thought abounded, feeling was suppressed or kept in abeyance as is the case with many of his countrymen. His preaching was singularly instructive, and hence was highly appreciated by the more thoughtful and intelligent. As might be expected, his congregations contained a large proportion of well instructed Christian men and women. The young of his flock, and those far beyond its bounds, received his special attention. Few excelled him as a Bible class teacher. In former years, when ministers were few and books comparatively scarce, he got together bands of young men, far from his home, and aided them in studying the scriptures, and in improving their minds by the acquisition of general knowledge. He would travel far to lecture to them periodically, to advise them in regard to their reading, and aid them in organizing a library in the locality. There are heads of families residing in the neighborhood of the writer, who gratefully acknowledge that the generous efforts of Dr. Thornton, nearly forty years ago, first stimulated them to seek mental and spiritual improvement. Notwithstanding his abundant outdoor labours, he was a great reader and a hard student, not only preserving in much freshness his classical knowledge, but keeping abreast of the age especially in the departments of theology and natural science. A more diligent and unweary labourer in the field of his ministry, until his departure to be forever with his beloved Master, it would be difficult to find. He was cheered during the past winter, by the increased interest in spiritual concerns, manifested by his congregation. He conducted nightly meetings for prayer during several weeks before Christmas, from which he had every reason to hope that blessed results would follow. He did not confine his labours to his own congregation. He cordially united with his brethren of other denominations in the town and neighborhood, in all Christian work.

For many years, he was clerk of Presbytery. It may be said with little exaggeration, that the "care of all the churches" in the Presbytery, devolved in a great measure upon him. For the last 24 years, the writer does not remember that he ever declined or plucked off from a single appointment of Presbytery, no matter how great the distance, or however bad the roads. He took a prominent, but not an obtrusive part in the business of our church courts. There he was a worker rather than a talker.

On the 26th of December, 1854, eight of the nine missionaries of the United Associate Synod met in Toronto, as the first Presbytery of that Church, and on that occasion Mr. Thornton preached from these words (Psalm xx. 5): "We will rejoice in thy salvation, and in the name of our God we will set up our banners." A few years ago he presided as last Moderator of the same church, on the occasion of its union with the Free Church. It may thus be said that he watched over its cradle and presided at its nuptials.

In 1859 the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity was conferred on him by the College of Princeton, New Jersey. And certainly, if large theological and scholarly attainments, and exemplary ministerial fidelity, merit such honour, Princeton did well in conferring it on him.

It is but justice to the departed, and may prove useful as an example, to state that Dr. Thornton and his kind hearted helpmate were noted for hospitality, and had ample opportunity, especially in former years, for the exercise of that Christian grace. For thirty-eight years they resided close by the Kingston Road, the leading highway of the Province, and as the doctor was widely known and highly respected, few days elapsed without having a call from some friend or friends passing that way; and they never failed to receive a kindly welcome and hospitable entertainment. It was a wonder to many how he, with so limited an income, could bring up a large family, giving them a good education, and exercise such large hospitality. But there is still wonderful outcome in the handful of meal in the barrel and the little oil in the cruise, to those who fear and serve the Lord; and this blessing usually comes, as it did in this case, through the medium of that "favor from the Lord," viz., a good wife.

Dr. Thornton was greatly blessed in his family. His was verily a happy Christian home. True the King of terrors entered it repeatedly, and bury away near and dear ones. His eldest son was removed when verging on manhood, and full of such promise as gladdens the hearts of Christian parents. A sweet little daughter was suddenly snatched from them by a painful accident. Not many years ago another daughter, "woman grown," gifted by nature, but more by grace, was called away. All these, however, they could look upon, not as lost, but "gone before." His beloved partner, though long an invalid, was graciously spared to him and within just a year and one day of his own removal, their Father's house in heaven. His eldest surviving son the Rev. Robert M. Thornton, is engaged in his Divine Master's work in Glasgow, Scotland. May he and the other members of the family continue to adorn the doctrine of Christ, and feel ever grateful to God for their honoured Christian parentage.

We have heard with pleasure that the congregation of Oshawa is noting most considerately and generously towards these members of Dr. Thornton's family who were yet under their father's roof when he died. The year's salary of their father is to be paid to them, and they are to occupy the manse till another pastor is obtained. This is every way worthy of the Christian people who enjoyed and appreciated the ministrations of Dr. Thornton.

His end was peaceful. Owing to the nature of the disease, his prostration was so great that he could speak only in monosyllables, and that with great difficulty, but towards the close, that tongue which had so often told of Christ's love became powerless, but there needed not a death bed declaration that he had felt the power of that love. One that was present on the solemn occasion thanked God for the testimony of a long consistent, and zealous Christian life. "Who that knows aught of his life and labours will not feel prompted to exclaim: 'Soldier of Christ well done.'"

A Conservative Opinion.

Editor BRITISH AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN.

Sir,—I am reading with some interest the discussion carried on in your paper on the question, "Psalms versus Hymns," and I have been led thereby to think that the logical consequences of the controversy will eventually take a much wider range than that in which it at present appears to be confined.

If it be right, in order to meet the wants and requirements of this progressive and enlightened age, to introduce into the public worship of God's house uninspired songs, it will be argued that it would be equally right and proper to dispense with the exclusive use of the prose portions of the sacred Scriptures at church services. There cannot certainly be any more harm occasionally reading, in place of the usual chapter from the inspired Book, one of Addison's beautiful prose essays, than there is in singing one of his magnificent poetic effusions, instead of one of David's inspired psalms. In this age of culture and so-called liberality, the tendency is to disparage inspiration, and in fact to deny the Divine authenticity of the Scriptures altogether; and when we hear these grand old psalms, around which our most cherished recollections cluster, spoken of by the hymn-innovators as "doggerel," and otherwise irreverently and slyly alluded to, we are disposed to take the alarm, and cling more tenaciously than ever, to the "old paths," believing it is better to err with our forefathers than risk the now-fangledisms of the innovators of the present day. I wonder if any one would say that the 92nd hymn in the English Presbyterian collection, purporting to be a version of the 180th Psalm, is in any sense equal to the Scottish version. I fully believe with Sir Walter Scott—no mean judge—that the version of the Psalms sung in Scottish churches cannot easily be improved.

Yours,
CONSERVATIVE.

DISMISS NO ENEMY MERELY BECAUSE HE seems weak; the fly and locust have done more hurt than bears and lions (Prov. vi). — J. H.