

BIOGRAPHY.

JOHN OWEN, D. D.

THIS eminent divine was born in 1616, at Studham, Oxfordshire. His father, descended from the royal line of Wales, was a Puritan minister. An early proficiency in elementary studies admitted John Owen to the University when only twelve years of age. Here he pursued his academical labours with unquenchable ardour, allowing himself only four hours' sleep in a night; though he afterwards confessed, that his sole stimulus to mental exertion was the ambitious hope of rising to some distinguished station in church or state. How often has the eye of Omniscience seen this odious mildew sprinkled over the academic laurels of those who have shone with envied lustre in the world!

Mr. Owen would, doubtless, have carried his point, had not God in mercy convinced him of the sin of aiming at his own glory, called him off from his former pursuits, and induced him to consecrate his future life, with all his talents, to the honour of God, and the improvement of his church. This rendered him averse to the superstitious rites which Laud was then introducing into the University; and thus alienated from him all his former friends, who fled from him as one infected with Puritanism: a disease, in their eyes, more dreadful than the plague; so that he was at length obliged to leave the college. He was thus thrown into the hands of the parliamentary party; which so incensed his uncle, who had supported him at the University, that he forever abandoned him, and settled his estate upon another person.

Mr. Owen, now cast upon the providence of God, went to live with a gentleman as his chaplain; but he, though the friend of this Puritan, being a zealous loyalist, went into the king's army, and thus left his chaplain once more to seek a maintenance. He went to London, where he was a perfect stranger, and had to struggle through his temporal difficulties with the additional burden of a troubled spirit; for after he first discovered the evil of sin, this towering genius, who had been the admiration of the University, was so broken down, that for three months, he could hardly speak a word to any one; and, for five years, the anguish of his mind embittered his life. Under this burden, he went, one Lord's day, to hear the Rev. Mr. Calamy, at Aldermanbury church; but, after waiting some time, a country minister, of whom he could never afterwards receive the least information, ascended the pulpit, and preached from Matthew viii. 26: "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith!" which happily removed all his doubts, and introduced him to the enjoyment of that sacred peace, which, without interruption, blessed all his future days.*

About 1642, the committee for ejecting scandalous ministers presented him to the living of Fordham, in Essex, where he laboured for a year and a half to the great satisfaction and advantage of the parishioners. But the patron of the living removed him from it, which gave the inhabitants of Coggeshall, about five miles distant, an opportunity to invite him to become their minister; and as the Earl of Warwick, the patron, gave him the living, he consented, and preached to a very judicious congregation of two thousand persons, with great success. Here his researches into the Scriptures induced him to abandon the Presbyterian system of church government, and to adopt the principles of the Independents; so that he not only formed a Congregational church, upon the plan which appeared to him to be dictated by Christ, in the New Testament, but became the most able vindicator of those sentiments which so much prevailed among Dissenters.

His name, like a rich perfume, could not be concealed, so that he was now called to preach before the parliament; and on the 29th of April, 1646, delivered to them a discourse on Acts xxvi. 2. It was a bold and energetic appeal to the wisdom and benevolence of the legislature, in behalf of those parts of the empire which were destitute of the light of evangelical instruction. Those who are only acquainted with the general strain of Dr. Owen's writings, would not suppose him capable of pouring forth that flood of lucid, glowing, popular eloquence, which is displayed in this

sermon. The day after the death of Charles I. he was called to the difficult task of preaching before the parliament again; when he chose for his text Jer. xv. 19, 20. Wisdom and fidelity joined to compose this discourse. Mr. Owen shortly after attended Cromwell to Ireland, where he presided in the college, and preached in Dublin upwards of a year and a half. He returned to his charge at Coggeshall, but was soon called to preach again at Whitehall, and afterwards to go into Scotland. The House of Commons at length presented him to the deanery of Christ Church, Oxford, and soon after he was made doctor in divinity, and chosen Vice-chancellor in the University: which honourable post he filled, with singular wisdom and prudence, during five years.

Thus, in the short space of ten years, we are called to witness the most complete revolution in his affairs; and after having seen him persecuted for his conscientious dissent from the church of his fathers, shunned by his former friends, disowned by his relations, disappointed of a good estate, driven from his college, cast upon the wide world, called to struggle with adversity, under the depression of a wounded conscience, which consumed his mental and corporeal vigour, we now behold him in the enjoyment of a peace "which passeth all understanding," exulting in the return of elasticity of mind, with health of body—filling the kingdom with the fame of his literary and religious eminence—introduced to the esteem of the highest characters and authorities in his country, and exalted to the first post which the Church of England then knew, by presiding over that University from which he had separated. History has seldom furnished a more effectual antidote against despondency in adverse circumstances, or a more animated exhortation to follow conscience and principle, wherever they may appear to lead.

Dr. Conant being elected Vice-chancellor. Dr. Owen took his leave of the University with an address, which presents a singularly beautiful combination of the jealousy which a learned and laborious man feels for his honest fame, with the humility of a Christian, absorbed in the honour and interests of his God. The fortunes and prospects of the University, when first it fell into the hands of the parliament party, are finely depicted, while the improvements which had been made during the five years of his chancellorship are hinted at with much delicacy. He now retired to his own private estate at Stadham, his birth-place; but the persecution, which followed the restoration, compelled him to take refuge in London, where he published his "Animadversions on a Popish Book, entitled Fiat Lux;" which recommended him to the esteem of Chancellor Hyde.

This learned man, however, not finding himself comfortable in England, was about to accept the invitation from the Independents in New England, to preside over the college they were establishing; but he was stopped by particular orders from the king; and when he was invited to fill the chair of Professor of Divinity in the United Provinces, love for his country induced him to waive the honour. He set up a lecture in London, as soon as King Charles' indulgence rendered it practicable; and while many eminent citizens resorted to his oral instructions, the books which he from time to time published, gained him the admiration and esteem of the learned and the great, among whom are particularly mentioned the Earls of Orrery and Anglesey, Lords Willoughby, Wharton, and Berkeley, and Sir John Trevor. The Duke of York and King Charles II. sent for him, and conversed with him concerning the Dissenters and liberty of conscience, which the king declared was right; and, as a testimony of his sense of the injustice done to the persecuted, gave the Doctor a thousand guineas to be distributed among the sufferers. When he applied to his tutor, Dr. Harlow, Bishop of Lincoln, in behalf of good John Bunyan, who was enduring a long and cruel imprisonment, the Bishop declined releasing the worthy Baptist, though he had given the Independent an assurance, "that he would deny him nothing that he could legally do." His learned labours procured him the acquaintance and esteem of many eminent foreigners; some of whom took a voyage to England to converse with this distinguished Briton; while others, having read his Latin treatises, learned the English language, that they might be able to read the rest of his works; which, indeed, are

sufficiently valuable to repay the labour of acquiring the most difficult language which has been spoken since the confusion of tongues.

When, exhausted by his excessive exertions of body and mind, he was unable to preach, he retired to Kensington, near London; but even here he was incessantly writing, whenever he was able to sit up. He afterwards removed to a house of his own at Ealing; where, employing his thoughts on the glories which were now opening upon his view, he composed his "Meditations on the Glory of Christ." Writing to a friend, at this time, he says, "I am going to him whom my soul has loved, or rather who has loved me with an everlasting love, which is the whole ground of all my consolation. I am leaving the ship of the church in a storm, but whilst the Great Pilot is in it, the loss of a poor under-rower will be inconsiderable. Live and pray, and wait and hope patiently, and do not despond; the promise stands invincible, that he will never leave us nor forsake us." He died on Bartholomew day, 24th of August, 1683, in the sixty-seventh year of his age.

He is described as tall in his person, with a grave, majestic, and comely aspect, and the air and deportment of a gentleman. He is said to have been very pleasant and cheerful in his social intercourse, having a great command of his passions, especially that of anger; but in his writings, the irritation of those contentious days sometimes appears. Even Anthony Wood was compelled to acknowledge, that "he was a person well skilled in the tongues, rabbinical learning, and Jewish rites, that he had a great command of his English pen, and was one of the fairest and gentlest writers that appeared against the Church of England." His knowledge of ecclesiastical history and polemical theology was profound. The acumen with which he detected the most specious, and the force with which he crushed the most formidable heresies, were, if possible, still surpassed by the accuracy with which he stated and explained the most profound discoveries of revelation, and the sanctity with which he directed every truth to the purification of the heart, and the regulation of the life. In his "Exposition of the Hundred and Thirtieth Psalm," he has developed the wise and benevolent purpose of God, in the mental conflicts which the author endured, and proved himself qualified thereby to guide the trembling steps of the returning sinner to the God of pardon; while his treatises "On the Mortification of Sin in Believers," "On Spiritual Mindedness," and "On the Glory of Christ," prove him equally fitted to guide the Christian in his more advanced stages, and to show him how "to finish his course with joy, so as to obtain an abundant entrance into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ." But his grand work is his "Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews."

This extraordinary man was as much beyond his age in political as in theological science; for he not only defended the doctrine of toleration, while it was most cruelly violated by the Stuarts; but when the Presbyterians were in the plenitude of their power, he addressed to the parliament a discourse in favour of this truly Christian and divine doctrine; in which he went on as large and generous principles as Mr. Locke afterwards did. Following Roger Williams, he has triumphantly proved that the Moloch, which had shed the blood of so many myriads of saints, founds its boasted rights upon a cloud.

But that which crowns the name of Owen with most resplendent and imperishable honours, is, that possessing a handsome estate, and labouring in the noblest employment of a literary life, he did not feel himself exempt from the duty of preaching the Gospel amidst the dangers and inconveniences of persecution; but delivered, with a simple, engaging eloquence, those divine truths from which he derived the solace of his days, and which he adorned by an unblemished life.

His works in folio are, "The Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews," in four volumes; "The Perseverance of Saints;" "A Treatise on the Holy Spirit;" and a volume of Sermons and Tracts. Twenty-one publications in quarto, devoted either to the vindication of the Christian doctrines, or to the defence of independent churches. In octavo, there are thirty pieces, some of them of considerable extent, and several of very distinguished excellence: The whole have been reprinted in twenty-eight volumes octavo.

* See Wesleyan for Dec. 24, 1840.