

OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

BELFAST PRESBYTERIANISM.

WITH SKETCHES OF ITS NOTED MINISTERS.

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The object of this paper is to bring before the readers of THE PRESBYTERIAN some account of the remarkable revival of Evangelical religion in the North of Ireland, with brief notices of its chief agents in the present century. The Province of Ulster occupying the northern portion of Ireland, was, at one time, of all the Provinces, the most hostile to the domination of England. In the year 1641 a terrible massacre of the settlers from Scotland, by the Roman Catholics, seemed almost to have swept out of existence the Scotch element; but the victories of Cromwell soon afterwards and the restoration of British rule re-established the Scottish people. Still they were oppressed by the ascendancy of the English Church. Large numbers of the gentry and wealthier classes became Episcopalians. The tithes system levied contributions from all classes without distinction, for the support of the established Episcopal Church. Yet the masses of the people clung to the Church of their fathers; and at the present day, nearly half the Protestantism of Ireland is found in the Presbyterian denomination.

A subtle enmity of the truth, however, appeared in the prevalence of Unitarianism, within the Presbyterian Church itself. A period of spiritual declension and apathy had come on; and many semi-infidels embraced the Arian system. A large proportion of the wealth and business of the North of Ireland was in their hands.

ARIAN MINISTERS

occupied seats in the Synod of Ulster; and there were, in the year 1823, no less than three Arian churches in Belfast, while only two or three congregations had Trinitarian ministers. Outside of Belfast there were a good many Unitarian congregations; but the masses of the people were true to the religion of their fathers, the religion of John Knox, and Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine. Some of the most eloquent men in the Presbyterian Church were avowed Arians; and that form of belief was prevalent and popular among the wealthier classes. Towards the middle of the last century an excellent classical and commercial academy had been established on very enlightened and enlarged principles. It fell, however, into the hands of the Rev. Dr. Bruce, a Unitarian, who deprived it to a great extent of its public character; and treated it as if it were his own property. A re-action took place, and a subscription was started for the erection of an institution, which should embrace both a system of schools and a Collegiate Department. A large proportion of the subscriptions came from India, and some from the colonies, the entire amount devoted to the building being £22,000, of which it was ascertained that not more than £5,000 were contributed by Unitarians. The schools of the institution were opened in the year 1817, and the Collegiate Department was soon after organized. The Presbyterian clergy of Ulster had hitherto received their collegiate education in Glasgow or Edinburgh; but an arrangement was made for their home-training in the collegiate classes of the institution. The management of the institution, however, fell into the hands of the Unitarians resident in Belfast. Collisions of sentiment produced trouble and dissatisfaction, which ultimately resulted in the abandonment of the Collegiate Department and the establishment of Queen's (Belfast) College on a broad and general foundation. In the meantime, a sharp controversy had risen in the Synod of Ulster, which resulted in the expulsion of the Arian members with their congregations, who united together under the name of the Remonstrant Synod. The chief opponent of the Unitarians in the Synod of Ulster was the Rev. Henry Cooke, afterwards known as Dr. Cooke, of Belfast. He was a man of commanding presence, tall and slender, but wiry and vigorous. The Rev. Dr. Henry Montgomery, minister of Dunmurry near Belfast, and Head Master of the English Department of the Belfast Institution was his antagonist. He was also tall, rather inclined to corpulence. If Dr. Cooke's eloquence might be called Demosthenic, Dr. Montgomery's was Ciceronian. The one was full of very energy, the other was winning and graceful. The result of their controversial war was the arrest of Unitarianism and the revival of Orthodoxy. In the year 1823 when I went to the Belfast institution as a pupil in the schools, there were in Belfast three Unitarian churches, wealthy and influential though not numerous in their membership. There was one large Orthodox congregation of the Synod of Ulster, one well filled Secession church, one belonging to the Covenanters, and a small seceding congregation, with the celebrated John Edgar, then a very young man, for its pastor. Allow me to anticipate the narrative by the statement that while the Arians have barely increased the number of their churches, the orthodox Presbyterians have now no less than thirty congregations, having in the course of sixty years increased in number ten-fold.

In the year 1826, chiefly through the influence of

Sabbath schools creating an increased interest in the study of the Scriptures.

EVANGELICAL SENTIMENTS HAD BEGUN TO REVIVE.

and larger church accommodation was sought for. The old church in Rosemary street; which had been one of the two churches of Belfast, when William III. visited the town in 1690, was full to overflowing. So great was the demand for sittings that the ownership of a single pew could be sold for 100 guineas, nearly \$500. The young men who had found Christ in the Sabbath school resolved on erecting another church, the one in Fishervick Place, which was opened in 1827 by Dr. Chalmers, and which immediately called the Rev. James Morgan for its pastor. The Rev. John Edgar had been ordained as minister of a small Secession Church in 1820. It may perhaps surprise my readers to learn that the minister of the old congregation in Rosemary street strenuously opposed both these movements. The young laymen, who became afterwards, many of them, wealthy and influential, notwithstanding discouragements, persevered. They wanted a spiritual home for themselves and for their families. Fishervick Place congregation soon became strong and numerous. Dr. Morgan was not a man of brilliant genius, like Dr. Cooke; but he was a most devoted pastor and a most impressive preacher. He possessed as much emotion in delivering as any one I have ever heard in the pulpit. Besides, he carried with him into all his work most remarkable prudence, or as he himself called it, "sanctified common-sense." He indulged in no utopian or impracticable schemes; but his heart was in his labour, both for his own congregation and for the general interests of Presbyterianism. When he had been two or three years pastor of the Fishervick Place congregation, he announced to his people that Belfast was then increasing so rapidly in population that it would be necessary to erect a new church every second year. In the meantime

DR. HENRY COOKE

had been installed as pastor of May Street congregation. The two men, as I have said, were very different from each other; but they both had large hearts; and, after consultation with some influential friends, they agreed on erecting a new church in Townsend street. The man that was called to the pastorate was the Rev. Josias Wilson, a most genial-hearted Christian and a capital preacher. He had been a favourite student of elocution, under the celebrated James Sheridan Knowles; and his delivery was rousing and most effective. I may here mention that Mr. Wilson, after a most successful pastorate in Townsend street was called, in 1844, to River Terrace Presbyterian Church in London. He said, in his jovial way, before leaving Belfast, that he had preached the end out of two churches, one in Drogheda and one in Belfast; and he hoped to do the same in London. In less than two years his hope was realized; but his health gave way; and he died greatly lamented.

I must here mention another efficient agency for mission work and church extension, the Belfast Town Mission, managed chiefly by laymen. About a year before Dr. Morgan was called from Lisburn to Belfast, an eminently pious layman, Wm. Cochrane, one of Dr. Morgan's Church members, was engaged as a town missionary. This was the commencement of a work of immense importance. It was not at first denominational, though it became subsequently Presbyterian. It was found to be very difficult, if not impossible, to carry on such work on a general and non-sectarian basis. The union into one body of the Secession Synod with the Synod of Ulster placed the Presbyterians in a more influential position; so that it was thought better to have a separate Presbyterian Town Mission. The agents of the mission were nearly all either theological students or licentiates; and a large number of the present congregations were gathered by this agency. The town mission is still kept up, but I have no recent report of its operations. In 1867 there were thirteen agents or town missionaries, besides the twenty pastors who had regular churches. This was a low average.

There were also public-spirited individuals, who employed their money and their spare time in tract distribution and house to house visitation. A distinguished merchant, Thomas Sinclair, whose death afterwards was very sad, was thus instrumental in the erection of "The Bethel," or church for sailors. Alexander Mayno, who still lives and labours in the Lord's work, did much also in the distribution of tracts in the neighbourhood of the wharfs among seamen, as well as in the printing and circulation of religious literature.

In the year 1859 the North of Ireland and especially Belfast was blessed with

A POWERFUL REVIVAL OF RELIGION,

accompanied by physical demonstrations, such as people falling down in mental agony, and crying out under conviction of sin. The centre of this remarkable awakening in Belfast was Great George's Street Church, of which the Rev. Thomas Toye, a native of Clonakitty, in the South of Ireland, was pastor. Mr. Toye was originally an Episcopalian; but he was ordained to the ministry by the Congregational denomination. He had, for several years, at his own ex-

posse, travelled all over Ireland as an Evangelist; but, having visited Belfast, he found the people and the principles of the Presbyterian Church agreeable to his views of Divine truth. Having made application, therefore, to the Presbytery of Belfast, he was received into the connection. Mr. Toye was a man of what was esteemed eccentric habits. His questions respecting personal religion, to all, with whom he had intercourse, were wonderfully plain, direct and pointed. For instance, in speaking to a doubting soul, he would quote John vi. 37: "Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out." Then came the questions—"Who says this? Who is Jesus? Does He mean what He says? Did He ever turn any away from Him? Do you think He has the heart to turn you away?" "I tell you," he would say, "you would be the very first who could say, 'I came to Jesus, and He refused to take me.' He cannot lie. You honour Him by taking Him at His word, committing the keeping of your soul to Him, as unto a faithful Creator."

The revival continued through the summer of 1860; and multitudes were added to the Church. Mr. Toye went over to Scotland for several years in succession, and was joyfully received by many, to whom his labours were greatly blessed. Mr. Toye's style of preaching was very scriptural; and his illustrations were often full of poetry and beauty. He revelled in the works of the old Puritan divines, Owen, Howo, and Baxter. Next to the Bible, he rejoices in the perusal of those venerable worthies.

In 1868 I visited the Old Country. Mr. Toye was still living; but his vigour had, in a great degree, left him. Drs. Cook and Morgan were also living. Dr. Morgan had been the pastor of my family before we came out to Canada, in 1845. Speaking to him one day, after my return to Ireland, I said: "Do you remember, doctor, how you announced many years ago, that Belfast was increasing so rapidly that we required to build a new church every second year?" "Yes!" he said, "I remember it well." Did you keep up to that standard of increase? "Yes! and in the year of the revival we built eight churches." Have you not, then, doctor, gone beyond the actual necessities? "No!" he said, "we still require more meeting houses."

I have now briefly sketched the increase of Presbyterianism in the capital of Ulster. It was to be expected that, as the population of the North of Ireland was originally from Scotland, and indeed many of the leading merchants were natives of that country, which has been so noted for the emigration of its people; the religion of the inhabitants of Belfast would be chiefly Presbyterian. In fact, however, other denominations have had large increases. In 1875 the population of the borough was 200,000; and the numbers of churches of the different denominations, were Presbyterian, 28; Episcopal, 19; Methodist 16; Miscellaneous, 7; while Unitarianism had scarcely increased at all for half a century, having still only four congregations. It may be called fossilized Christianity.

One thing I must not omit to mention, as highly creditable to the success of the Marquises of Dougal, the owners of the land on which Belfast is built. All sites for churches and charitable institutions have been given free of rent or other charges. This was obviously a great means of facilitating the increase of places of worship.

Another cause of the advance of Presbyterianism was the united and harmonious spirit of the ministers. Each of course, had chiefly at heart the interests and increase of his own congregation; but Cooke, Morgan, Robert Wilson, John Edgar, David Hamilton, Thos. Toye, Josias Wilson, and Robert Knox were large-hearted men, far above mere selfish considerations. They laboured for Christ; and Christ blessed and prospered their labour, far beyond their own congregations. All these I have now mentioned have gone to their reward. "They rest from their labours, and their works do follow them."

DR. WM. JOHNSTON

still remains, as far as I know almost the only remaining link of the present and past generations of pastors, a man worthy of the highest honour. A proposal was lately started, by his friends and admirers, to get up for him a substantial token of regard and esteem; but the honour was respectfully declined; and a request was made, by Dr. and Mrs. Johnston, that the money should be given for the erection of a "Home for training orphans."

Let me now add a few words of application of my subject in regard to Toronto. This city resembles Belfast in its rapid increase in wealth and population. The churches so far seem to have kept pace with the increase of the people; yet I have no doubt that city missionaries would soon gather more congregations, without any detriment to the present churches. May a spirit of missionary effort and self-forgetfulness soon characterize all the churches and all their ministers!

In concluding this brief sketch of Belfast Presbyterianism, I may be asked what seem to have been the chief causes of its increase. 1st, I would mention the character of the people. A more enterprising and intelligent population can be found nowhere. Any one, who has visited the town and mingled with its