

Robert Raikes

The Founder of the Sunday School

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I.—CONDITIONS OF HIS AGE.

TO properly appreciate the work of Robert Raikes we must understand in some measure the conditions of the age in which he worked. In the early part of the eighteenth century human energy in England had turned into material channels, and religion was crowded into the background. We read that nothing could be a greater proof of royalty than a fearless disobedience of the law of God. Severe though this statement may seem, it was largely true. Money was before all else the people's god; velvets and jewels took the place of virtue among the women and of honor among the men. The whole tone of moral sentiment was very low, and the church, which was fast falling into a position of slight importance, did little or nothing to raise the standard.

While not discrediting all the clergy, it is a lamentable fact that the majority of them cared nothing whatever for their charges and were devoid of all genuine religious activity. The upper classes scoffed at religion, were corrupt and without refinement, while the poor were severely brutal, ignorant beyond description, and without any clear sense of honesty.

Although the population had greatly increased with the development of manufactures, this vast increase had been accompanied by no religious or educational movement. No new schools had been created since the grammar schools of Edward VI, and Elizabeth, and scarcely one new church had been built.

The jails were crowded and in them chaos, cruelty and shame held sway. The grossest immorality prevailed, and the jail-fever that continually pervaded these haunts of despair came as a relief to many poor victims.

We can scarcely imagine that men in public office did not grapple with these problems, for they surely must have known that such punishment did not make men better, and that prisoners must come out from such places more degraded and hardened than before; yet such considerations were apparently left unnoticed.

To make matters worse, there was no effective police, mob violence was common, and the criminal class grew in boldness and in numbers until no law so unnatural was enforced, that he who committed so trifling an offence as the cutting down of a cherry tree was liable to suffer capital punishment.

We may well imagine that such laws could in no way benefit society. As we shall see, the change was to come from within, rather than from without. It was to have its birth in the hearts of men who were deeply religious, men who were in sincere sympathy with the sufferings of mankind, and who saw that no progress whatever could be expected from a people with no moral or religious training.

Prominent among these men stood Wesley, but we shall only make mention of his work in so far as may show more clearly the exact place and mission of Robert Raikes.

Raikes is closely connected with the Wesleyan revival, for although it had practically done its immediate work before his special philanthropic efforts began, the latter were, partially at least, a result of the former, and Methodism is not the only result of the Wesleyan movement which kindled the whole social fabric with flames of a new moral enthusiasm at the same time that it awakened from its lethargy the entire church of Christ throughout the United Kingdom.

It gave rise to the steady attempt toward remedying the social degradation and physical suffering of the poor and profligate, in the movement of which Mr. Raikes appears as the leading champion.

Just how far the germ of his work lay in the religious revival one cannot fully determine, but it is clear that had his task never been done the result of the revival would have been largely confined to the age which gave it birth, or at least have stopped far short of its present goal.

THE STATE OF CHILDHOOD.

With this broad and general outlook upon existing conditions in our mind we must examine the state of childhood and its environment as Mr. Raikes saw it in his daily life.

The condition in 1780 of the vast majority of the children, those of the working class, it is indeed hard for us to imagine to-day. The problem of the child was left altogether unvisited; not even the parents seemed to consider it. If Christ's words, "Suffer little children to come unto me," were read at all, they must have conveyed no adequate idea of their true meaning, while "Train up a child in the way he should go," must have been passed by unnoticed. One can scarcely imagine how an enlightened

but to any city in the kingdom. Nor was it confined to the towns alone, but had its counterpart among the peasantry in the rural districts. Here is a sentence describing the state of things on Sundays: "The street is filled with multitudes of wretches who, released from employment, spend their time in noise and riot, playing at chuck, and cursing and swearing in a manner so horrid as to convey to a serious mind an idea of hell rather than any other place." "Wretches!" What a name to give to these wretched, bright-eyed children—creatures full of fun and frolic and mischief, in whom lay intelligence undeveloped, love and sweetness uncultivated, yet hatred unrestrained. As we see them there, ragged, dirty and disgusting, we must admit that the name is not misapplied, for to all appearances they surely are wretched. In this "waste" which society treated as useless, lay untold powers for good or evil. Would that budding talent be worse than useless, would that native energy strengthen the powers of evil, or would it be claimed for God and humanity?

We can only conjecture what might have been the result to the church and the world had not Robert Raikes at this time of crisis raised aloft the cry, "*Vice is preventable. Begin with the child.*" but we know that before long his watchword flew from mouth to mouth, and in a few years the child-life of the entire kingdom,—yes, even of the lands across the sea,—had completely changed.

WESLEY AND THE CHILDREN.

Before leaving this part of our study to enter more directly upon the life and work of our founder, we would like to clear up a difficulty which may have arisen in some minds. When we consider that the Wesleyan revival had already stirred the nation to its depths and was breaking the witherage of the church and raising the standard of morals and social life, it may seem strange that such a state of ignorance and degradation should exist among the children. The men of intelligence and foresight had not championed their cause before this. When we consider that to-day men all over the world are studying child-life even as a science, it does seem strange that less than a century ago a huge and public mind seemed to have no idea of the importance and necessity of saving and teaching the children.

Perhaps the only excuse that can be offered is the indifference which seemed to have settled down upon a people whose ideas, whatever they may have been in other directions, were in regard to child-life very hazy indeed.

But one may say, "Surely Wesley must have had some insight into the problem," and the answer is a most emphatic "Yes." Here are a few of his own words, "Unless we can take care of the rising generation, the present revival of religion will last on the verge of a man." He grasped the new idea that God begins His work in children, and he strongly advised his preachers to spend an hour a week with the children in every large town. But there was a lack quite apparent in its effect. Wesley's immediate mission was to perishing men and women, so although he was in direct sympathy



GLoucester Cathedral.

Christian country could have allowed such a state of affairs to exist, and yet it did so. When we realize that the new generation on which England was to depend for her greatness consisted of a mass of child "waste," growing up in illiteracy with no moral or religious training, we cannot pay too much tribute to the man who called the attention of his age to the vital importance of the child, and who, by his establishment of the Sunday School, revived interest in education, thus raising the moral tone of society and doing what the nation at large had for years failed to accomplish through its penal code.

We shall perhaps begin to appreciate the vast importance of his work when we remember that so careful an historian as Green says, "The Sunday Schools established by Mr. Raikes of Gloucester were the beginning of popular education," and the great economist, Adam Smith, declared that no plan promised to effect a change of manners with equal ease and simplicity since the days of the apostles.

What immense room there was for change can readily be seen if we picture, to ourselves a street in Gloucester, a street which is no exceptional one, but presents a scene common not only to this particular city