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Selwyn, D.D.: Volume 1

H. W. Tucker

Excerpt

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GEORGE AUGUSTUS SELWYN, D.D.

CHAPTER I.

EARLY YEARS AND EDUCATION.

[1809—1831.]

THE memories of the servants of God are not less the treasures of the Church than are the active services which they were enabled to render on earth; and if the present age is rich, beyond all its predecessors, in biographies of those who have endured hardness in the mission field, and counted not their lives dear unto them, the fact must be accepted as only another proof of the revival of spiritual life and zealous devotion, of which the Anglican Communion has been the favoured exponent during the past forty years.

The accident that the great men, whose labours we reverence and whose memories we cherish, found the sphere, in which their gifts were more prominently called forth, amid the plains of India or the snows of North America, in the sparsely peopled wastes of Southern Africa, or in the blue waters of the far Pacific, only brings into greater prominence the fruits of the magnificent movement which having its origin in the Mother Church has made itself felt in the ends of the earth. Those noble

VOL. I.

B

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[More information](#)

spirits who went out to distant lands, there to extend the frontiers of the Anglican Communion and to gather in the heathen to her fold, were the very men who had drunk most deeply of the spirit which has made the Church of England what she now is, and has revealed her almost incalculable capacities alike of growth and of influence: they were grudged as one by one they went forth from our struggling Church, which seemed to need their gifts only too sorely; but by that law of our spiritual life which provides that no venture of faith is allowed to be without its reward, and that what seems to be loss shall prove to be certain gain, the exile of these chivalrous souls has had the most distinct and potent influence on the Church which they have left; each act of self-sacrifice which has moved a man to sever himself from home and friends, and to bury himself in the wilderness, has raised, almost at a bound, the standard of ministerial obligation at home, and has inspired the whole heart of the Church which sent him forth.

It has been no book-making instinct but a true appreciation of the value of high example and sacred memories which has given us the biographies of the great pioneers of the Church in these last days; which has shown us how the Poet Heber and the scholarly and statesman-like Cotton laboured and died at their posts in Hindostan; which has permitted us to study the varied gifts of the ascetic Stewart, Bishop of Quebec; of the far-seeing Strachan, Bishop of Toronto; of the patient Feild, the apostle to the fishermen of Newfoundland; of Robert Gray, the dauntless confessor of Southern Africa; of John Armstrong, all too early, as we think, removed from his task of laying the foundations of the See of Grahams-town; of Charles Frederic Mackenzie, the simple-hearted martyr, whose body rests beside the waters of the African stream; of Addington Venables, who held on, in spite of bodily weakness and personal griefs, labouring while his day lasted, for his poor negro flock in the Bahamas; of

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Patteson, who poured out his life for the people for whom he had already given up family and friends and all that this world can offer.

The Church which in the course of hardly more than one generation has sent forth sons such as these can be no barren Church : nor are these all : others there have been, in no degree inferior in spiritual gifts or in the use which they have made of them, whose labours have been none the less abundant, whose memories are only the less treasured because they have not found a chronicler. Such were Bishop Coleridge, the friend of Keble, the first Bishop of Barbados, and the first Warden of St. Augustine's College, Canterbury ; Bishop Broughton, the first Bishop of Australia, whom no distance wearied, no difficulty daunted, and whose far-reaching counsel, with an instinct that may without exaggeration be called prophetic, traced out the boundaries of Sees and Provinces which to ordinary minds seemed but the mere creatures of an idle fancy : Bishop Milman, whose great intellect compels our admiration hardly more than the patience with which he exercised his many gifts on a people who promised small results to his efforts ; Bishop Fulford, the calm and thoughtful Metropolitan, foremost in the work of teaching the unestablished Churches of the Colonies to govern themselves, in full reliance on the Divine life that glowed within them.

These memories point not only to the past : they are full of life and encouragement for the future. There must be a noble future for a Church whose store in Paradise is already so rich ; and it is not the least of the rewards accorded to those who have aided in the propagation of the Faith in other lands, that amid the distractions and the controversies, the unfaithfulness and the timidity which harass us at home, we can look abroad, and in the Churches to whose foundation our own self-denial has contributed, can discover, not indeed the "pomp and circumstance" which counts for so much in the estimation

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of the world, but the undoubted token of a living faith and of a vigorous apostolate.

The subject of the present memoir was, in the conditions of his ministerial life, unlike any other ecclesiastic of our communion. A parallel case has indeed been discovered by those who are fond of tracing analogies in the person of the Eastern prelate Innocent, who in the year 1868 was translated from the Bishopric of Kamschatka, where for many years he had been doing the work of an evangelist, to the See of Moscow; but in the English Church it has only been given to one man to lay as a wise master-builder, the foundations of a Christian Church in the uttermost part of the earth, to unite in the bonds of the one Faith two races as unlike to each other as it is possible to conceive, and after more than a quarter of a century of work in which he was the pioneer, guided by no precedents more recent than were furnished by the Apostles and the immediate successors of their missionary labours, to return to England and, succeeding to a diocese whose traditions stretch back into the past for a thousand years, to raise the dignity and the usefulness of a position thus venerable to a level never obtained before.

Non cuivis homini contingit adire Corinthum. But more than this; while personally the most humble of men, he became by no effort of his own the foremost personage in the whole Anglican Communion: he headed no party; he uttered no shibboleths; in spite of himself, by the mere force of his character and example he was the leading spirit in the Australasian Churches in whose development he had had so large a share: and in the Lambeth Conference of 1867, and in the Upper House of the Convocation of Canterbury, he was listened to with an attention which no other prelate could command: while in the United States amid the people of another land, citizens of the great Republic and members with ourselves of the same Communion, he exercised an influence which no one person ever before wielded or possibly ever coveted. Each branch

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[More information](#)

1809-1831.]

PEDIGREE.

5

of the Church looked to him for advice, in full confidence that the counsel given, whatever it might be, would be biassed not a hair's breadth by any secondary consideration.

If it be asked what was the cause of this homage thus voluntarily accorded, it may be said in reply that subsidiary causes were many: no one could be insensible to the charm of that gracious presence, that bright incisive speech, that gentle manner, that playful wit: physical beauty and mental culture were his in highest measure, and these gifts will always make themselves felt; but beyond all these it was the knowledge of the man's true nobility of character, the unselfishness which was so much a part of himself as to seem to be without effort, the obedience to rule and order which was the guiding principle of his life, and the assurance that nothing mean or sordid would ever be connected with aught that he said or did, that compelled the not unwilling homage which men paid to him.

George Augustus Selwyn was born at Hampstead in 1809, the descendant of an ancient family whose members have made their mark in their several callings. Jasper Selwyn, admitted at Lincoln's Inn in the twenty-sixth year of Elizabeth, was twice elected Treasurer of the Inn, and his name and arms are in the west window of the chapel which was consecrated in 1623. Major-General Selwyn, the great-great-grandfather of the bishop, was Governor of Jamaica at the beginning of the last century: one of his three sons, Colonel John Selwyn, was *aide-de-camp* to Marlborough. The famous wit, George Selwyn the friend of Horace Walpole, was of the same family.

The grandfather of the future Bishop of New Zealand and Lichfield was King's Counsel and Treasurer of Lincoln's Inn. He had two sons: George, who died soon after taking a degree at Cambridge; and William, the father of the subject of this biography. He was sent to Eton,

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[More information](#)

and was one of the eleven whom the school sent forth to uphold its reputation in the cricket-field: in 1793 he entered St. John's College, Cambridge, and graduated in 1797, as Senior Optime after having gained the first Chancellor's medal. The fellowships at St. John's being limited to the natives of particular counties, he had migrated in his second year to Trinity. He resigned without a contest his claim to a Fellowship in favour of others whose circumstances made the possession of that reward more necessary to them. He published in 1806 "*Selwyn's Nisi Prius*," with which his name was ever afterwards connected; in 1827 he was appointed King's Counsel, and in 1840 was Treasurer of Lincoln's Inn. Soon after the marriage of her present Majesty he was selected as "the Instructor of Prince Albert in the Constitution and Laws of his adopted country," and the tenth edition of his book on "*Nisi Prius*" was dedicated—

"ALBERTO PRINCIPI,
LEGUM ANGLIÆ STUDIOSO."

At the time of his death, in 1855, he was Senior Queen's Counsel.

If it be worth while to go back to early years there is no lack of testimony, that in the nursery the same disposition was apparent in George Augustus Selwyn which characterised his subsequent life, but, as may be expected, rough hewn and undisciplined. "My brother," writes one of his sisters, "was a strong self-willed child, and my mother had to use Solomon's remedy. The nurse was injudicious and complained, but the result proved the wisdom of the parent." And side by side with this resolute will there was the unselfishness "which made him energetic and ready to assist in any emergency which might arise in the nursery. If any case of distress was mentioned in his hearing, his pocket-money was at once devoted to its relief. I trembled under his eye if I took a little more at table than he thought (in his self-denying goodness) to be necessary."

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

1809-1831.

BOYHOOD.

7

Further testimony is borne by his sisters to "the influence which he had over our home life—he was truly the family friend and counsellor, ever ready to help in all difficulties. I have known him spend many hours of the few brief holidays he allowed himself in endeavouring to amuse his suffering mother, who laboured for many years under a most painful depression of spirits. He was in fact the only person who could rouse her from the morbid state of feeling produced by her malady, and though with the zeal and devotion which characterized her through life she willingly gave him up to his Master's service, yet she never recovered the loss of his affectionate attentions, and I found her in a state of insensibility kneeling at her evening prayers beneath his picture, under which she died : she never spoke again, but lingered for a few hours and expired on the first anniversary of his consecration, October 17, 1842. All the bishop's earlier letters with interesting accounts of his voyage were addressed to her, but few reached their destination till after her death ; the news of this loss deeply affected him, and in one pathetic passage of a letter written just after receiving the intelligence he described himself as 'going heavily as one that mourneth for his mother.'"

The same contempt for softness and luxury, it may be said the same indifference to comfort, which enabled him in later years to endure so much hardness on board ship, in camp and on Melanesian coral-reefs, characterized him when a boy. The story is still current in the family, that when he came home from Eton one Easter-tide he wished to invite a friend to stay with him, the friend being none other than Mr. Gladstone. His mother said it was impossible, that "the spring cleaning was going on," and guests would be in the way. "George rushed up stairs and soon reappeared with a great mattress which he hurled down on the wet boards, saying, 'There now, where's the difficulty?'"

When he was seven years old—in 1816, he was sent

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[More information](#)

to a famous preparatory school at Ealing, which was kept by a Dr. Nicholas, whose pupils rarely fell below three hundred in number, and who had included in their ranks the brothers J. H. and F. W. Newman. Here he acquired two accomplishments, of which at least one is not generally affected by high-spirited lads of seven. He was a great dancer, and taught his sisters the Mazurka during the holidays, saying that "exercise was good:" he also acquired a knowledge, strange and incongruous as it seems, of the Racing Calendar! Some of his companions were the sons of gentlemen who owned race-horses, and they took a precocious interest in their fathers' tastes. George Selwyn thus got to know the names and qualities of famous horses, and although he never at any time cared for the sport, he used many years later to astonish his friends by his familiarity with the names and pedigrees of great performers on the Turf.

Childish precocity has no bearing on the character of maturer years, but these reminiscences, treasured by those who loved him well, are not out of place in a memoir such as the present aims at being: from the earliest years to its close there is an eminent consistency in the life which these pages record, and to suppress these stories would be to mar its unity. In the very letter from which they were extracted sisterly affection has written:—

"There was nothing that was pious, noble, self-denying and generous, that my brother did not exhibit in his daily life, and as years drew on he was more than ever constant in prayer, never ceasing in the service of his heavenly Master."

In due course he was sent to Eton, where his career was marked by proficiency both in scholarship and in athletic sports; nor was his reputation wanting for even higher things: the late Bishop Trower, who acted as his commissary at Lichfield in the year 1868, when he paid a hurried and farewell visit to New Zealand, used to relate that George Selwyn effectually put down the use of profane language

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

1809-1831.]

CAMBRIDGE.

9

among the boys in his division of the school. The Selwyns did much for Eton, as Eton had done much for them. There were four brothers at Eton and Cambridge. William, the eldest, was Sixth Wrangler, Senior Classic, Craven Scholar, and Chancellor's Medallist, and died Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity. The third, Thomas Kynaston, died young, but carried the fame of a Newcastle Scholar with him to Cambridge, where a Fellowship at Trinity was awaiting him when he died : to him as to his eldest brother had fallen the distinctions of Craven Scholar and Chancellor's Medallist. The fourth, who died in 1869, was for many years one of the Members for the University and became Lord Justice.¹ The future bishop graduated in 1831.²

¹ The following touching sonnet, suggested by the last hours of Lord Justice Selwyn, was written by Professor Selwyn, his eldest brother :—

THE NIGHT OF SORROW, AUGUST 10-11, A.D. 1869.

“ O strange dark night ! the weary watches through
I moved between my brothers, to and fro ;
One deeply slumbering, worn with toil and woe,
And one who never sleeping, faintly drew
His failing breath ; yet with firm heart and true
Confest his faith in Christ, the risen Life ;
With smiles of comfort, cheering his sad wife,
And blessing all ; our love no more could do ;
But we could feel a gracious Presence nigh
Turning our night to day ; and with the spring
Of morn we gathered round the sacred bed
And on the Bread of Life together fed ;
The Bishop spake, ‘ O Death, where is thy sting ? ’
The Judge, ‘ O Grave, where is thy victory ? ’ ”

² He was not a reading man at the University, and for mathematics he had an actual distaste. A brother undergraduate, who survives him, and whose name appears in the first class of each Tripos in 1831, says that he positively hated the necessary preparation to secure a place, however low, in the Mathematical Tripos which would allow him to go in for the Classical Tripos ; that he spoke of his degree as his jubilee, and used to score off on a diary which hung over his chimney-piece each day which marked the approach of the Examination. He came out with very little to spare, being low down among the Junior Optimes ; when the class list, however, was read out, and he saw how low his position was, he went off with his

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H. W. Tucker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

His scholarship seems to have been unusually exact even for an Eton boy in the days of Keate; and the following anecdote recorded in Mr. Maxwell Lyte's *History of Eton College* would testify as much to the boy's conscientious determination to render his author exactly as to his keen perception of his words:—

“He was translating to Dr. Keate Horace's account of the auctioneer at the barber's shop, *proprios purgantem leniter unguet*—‘cleaning his own nails’ (Ep. I. vii. 51). Keate corrected him—‘cleaning his nails. Go on.’ Again and again the boy said ‘his own nails.’ Keate scolded him; but he held out against the less emphatic ‘his,’ and argued the point thus: ‘If you please, sir, Horace lays the stress on the word *proprios*, because most of the dandies made the barbers pare their nails; and when Philippus saw Mena paring his *own* nails, *vacuá in umbrá*—though nobody was engaging the barber's time—he thought him a man of some energy, and likely to become a good farmer.’ Dr. Keate generously appreciated the criticism, and said, ‘Well, there's something in that. Lay the stress, then, on *proprios*.’” (P. 367.)

The four brothers boarded in the same house with Mr. Gladstone, and took their full share in all the activities, physical and intellectual, of the famous school. George and Mr. Gladstone, with others who subsequently attained high distinction in the world, were among the contributors to the *Eton Miscellany*. In the *Eton College Chronicle* of June, 1878, a contributor under the well-known initials “C. J. A.” writes:—

“The name of Selwyn has long been enrolled in the ‘Eton Lists,’ and long held in honour. The eldest brother of the late Bishop was the best sculler of his day at Eton, and the best scholar of his day at Cambridge. George, the friend to the bathing-place, three miles distant. It was January, but they bathed daily. For a long time he was silent. At last he said, “Well, I've had many a licking at Eton, but I never felt so beaten as I do now.” In due course he went into the Classical Tripos and came out Second Classic. Few Wranglers have turned their mathematical attainments to such use as this “Junior Optime” did his, as may be seen *infra* pp. 108, 109, 114, 259, 266, 233.