

LIFE

OF

SIR JOHN FOWLER

CHAPTER I.

EARLY LIFE

JOHN FOWLER, the subject of this biography, was born at his father's house, Wadsley Hall, near Sheffield, on the 15th of July, 1817. For more than 200 years the Fowler family had been connected with Wincobank, a district called after the hill of that name in the neighbourhood of Sheffield. John Fowler the father, himself the son of a John Fowler of Wincobank, was brought to be baptised at Ecclesfield Church on the 18th of June, 1784. Though living all his life in the neighbourhood of Sheffield, he never became closely connected with the mineral industries of the district. In early life he was among the young patriots of the day who took an active part in forming a regiment of volunteers to resist the French invasion threatened by Napoleon. At the age of nineteen he was lieutenant and quartermaster in a band of 200 raised in the neighbourhood of Ecclesfield. A false alarm, caused by the accidental lighting of a beacon

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Thomas Mackay

Excerpt

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fire, called out the regiment and marched them off to the east coast. This military incident in an otherwise uneventful life was often the subject of some pleasant merriment in the family circle, and as late as 1868 the old gentleman wrote a brief account of the bloodless career of the Ecclesfield volunteers, which Dr. Gatty has incorporated in his edition of Hunter's *History of Hallamshire*.

For five years Mr. Fowler gave close attention to his military duties; he then retired and applied himself to his profession, that of a land surveyor. It is pleasant to think that within sound of the whirr and grinding of the Sheffield machinery it was possible for one whose tastes lay in that direction to win competence and reputation from the ancient industry of the land, and to rear a family of healthy and stalwart sons ready to play their part in the careers which economic changes rendered for them inevitable. His residence of Wadsley Hall was the place where the courts of the manor of Wadsley were held, a link with the vanishing order of things, yet standing on the confines of the new industry, and soon to be the birthplace of one who played an important part in the economic revolution which was then pending. The elder Fowler could resist the attraction which has ever been drawing the population from the country and its pursuits to the town, and to the triumphs, the sufferings, and the still unsolved problems of the modern industrial system. John Fowler the son, as we shall presently see, eagerly and confidently and with a real enjoyment of work and struggle, threw himself into the stream of the new industry, and was carried to successes typical not only of the noble profession which

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he had embraced, but indicative also of high personal qualities of courage, endurance, and skill.

To return, however, to his parentage. John Fowler the elder married on the 24th of December, 1815, Miss Elizabeth Swann, daughter of William Swann of Dykes Hall. In a letter, written at the time of his wife's death, to his daughter-in-law (wife of Sir John Fowler), Mr. Fowler recounts the history of his two years' courtship and of his marriage on Christmas Eve to Miss Swann; he relates how they decided to remain in his home at Wadsley instead of spending the honeymoon in travel, and how, in the drawing-room of the bride's new home, after the wedding guests had gone, he offered a prayer, specially prepared by himself for the occasion. This prayer found its answer in many long years of happy married life.

Mrs. Fowler belonged to the generation which valued highly the arts of the good housewife, and in these she excelled. To her intelligence and capacity were due the admirable arrangements for the comfort of the large family circle at Wadsley Hall. Her husband, who inherited from his father a fine physique and a stature of six feet, was a man of amiable and most trustworthy character. So highly esteemed was his probity, that he not infrequently was asked to act as sole valuator by contending parties. His habits of life were most methodical; up to the last year of his life he never retired to rest without making a personal inspection of his farm premises, in order to see that every animal had received its proper share of attention.

To this couple was born on the 15th of July, 1817, the subject of this biography, John Fowler the engineer. Other children came in due course:

William, who established large ironworks near Chesterfield; Henry, an engineer, who died on his return from India, comparatively young; Charles, an architect, who emigrated to Australia; Robert, a solicitor in Westminster; and Frederick, who succeeded to and extended the paternal business; one daughter married Mr. Whitton, government engineer of railways in New South Wales; a second married Captain Holmes, of Norfolk; a third remained unmarried in attendance on her father. Mrs. Fowler, the mother, died on the 5th of June, 1858. Her husband survived her for many years, and died on the 19th of August, 1872, in his eighty-ninth year.*

Mr. Fowler the elder was an energetic man of business, but his interests lay somewhat apart from the new industry. The career of John Fowler the son was mapped out by himself. His early letters to his father, though testifying to his filial affection and respect, rarely ask for advice, but exhibit a confident, self-reliant tone which is not a little remarkable in one so young. The son, soon immersed in the restless whirl of the new industry, is fond of poking a little kindly

* The Rev. J. EASTWOOD, in his learned *History of the Parish of Ecclesfield* (1862), gives some additional genealogical details. "Wadsley Hall," he says, "was rebuilt in 1722 by Charles Burton; it has been for the last forty-seven years in the occupation of John Fowler, Esq., whose family sprang from Wincobank in this parish. Joshua Fowler (born at Wincobank and baptised at Ecclesfield in 1678) died April 27th, 1742. His son Samuel married, November 11th, 1731, Hannah, daughter of William Dixon, of Shiregreen, and died April 6th, 1760. John, the son of Samuel, born at Wincobank in 1746, married Hannah Webster (who died January 25th, 1829, aged seventy-four), and died May 25th, 1808. Their son was the present Mr. Fowler, whose wife Elizabeth, daughter of William Swann of Dykes Hall, died June 5th, 1858, aged sixty-six, leaving a numerous family, the eldest of whom is John Fowler of Queen Square Place, Westminster, a distinguished engineer," etc., etc. (p. 448).

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fun at the stay-at-home instincts of his parents, coupled with genuine expressions of regret that they cannot summon up energy to visit him at some of the temporary halting-places to which his professional engagements called him. The correspondence between father and son was continued to the end of the former's long life. There will be occasion to quote from it in the course of this narrative; one point, however, may here be noticed.

It was a characteristic of the younger man that he always sought to make men talk on their own subjects. In his letters to his father, more especially in later years, when his professional engagements carried him to the ends of the earth—to Spain, to Egypt, and to India—his familiar talk (for the family letter is a species of familiar talk) to his father is not of bridges and railways and hydraulic power, but of cattle and horses and agriculture.

This trait may perhaps appear again. Here it has only been noticed to mark by the son's testimony what we believe to have been the principal secular interest in his father's life.

The parish of Ecclesfield is for the most part a bleak moorland country, now much encroached upon by the advancing town. Roger Dodsworth, the Yorkshire topographer, visited Ecclesfield Church in 1628, and describes it as follows:—

“This church is called and that deservedly by the vulgar the Mynster of the Moores, being the fairest church for stone, wood, glass and neat keeping that ever I came in of country churches.”

To this church, for many years after their marriage, Mr. and Mrs. Fowler used to ride across the fields

Sunday after Sunday, mounted on an old-fashioned pillion saddle. John Fowler, their eldest child, acquired by inheritance the vigour of a family reared for generations in this upland country. The Yorkshireman of the moors has the hardiness of his surroundings, but he lives too near the stir of the great world to entertain for long any of the dreamy listlessness often characteristic of those who, like the Highlander, are entirely secluded from the modern spirit. The family were in easy though not affluent circumstances. There was no question of the future engineer being made an eldest son, and so deprived of the inspiring responsibility of earning his own living. At the same time he was not stinted of the sound but not ornamental education which was then available for the middle and professional classes of the country.

At the age of nine John Fowler was sent to Whitley Hall, a private school near Ecclesfield, kept by Mr. Rider. Mr. Rider is described in Mr. Eastwood's book as one "under whose gentle but efficient guidance many of the principal young men of the neighbourhood received their education."

With regard to his school days, Sir John Fowler in late life wrote down the following reminiscence, which is best given in his own words :—

"I remember two incidents there—one, being teased by an elder boy until a fight took place, when the elder boy had two front teeth knocked out. The mother of the boy was sent for, and a scene and examination occurred, resulting in my acquittal of all blame and my resolution never to fight again—a resolution I kept through life.

"Another incident was a fall from a wall and a cut on the eyebrows, leaving a well-defined cross, ever afterwards to be visible, by which I could be identified.

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“At this early age I began a habit of telling stories in bed, which I invented in the dormitory where there were several boys, and gradually acquired such proficiency in making them more and more horrible until timid boys sometimes wept. Unfortunately one of the masters happened to hear something going on, and listened, and heard what induced him to put a stop to my improvising, or I might have acquired some curious proficiency.

“I shall never forget an attempt to frighten me by a big boy coming into the bedroom one night wrapped in a sheet, with a large hollow turnip on the top of his head and a lighted candle inside. I threw a pillow so well that the boy and candle upset, and the boy himself was so frightened that he screamed loudly and brought up the master, and we all got a tremendous lecture.

“I was active and strong, and could throw a cricket ball further than any boy of my age, and was soon very much devoted to the game. I never became scientific, but was a hard hitter and a fast bowler; and my last stroke before giving up the game altogether was breaking a window of the parlour of Lord’s cricket ground.*

“I was fairly quick in elementary scholarship, and in mental arithmetic was decidedly beyond the average of boys and men—a gift which was of great convenience and value in after life.

“It was not my good fortune to be at a great public school or at either of the Universities.

“I was always deeply interested in engineering, both in books and works, and was so fixed in my determination about my future career that at the early age of sixteen I persuaded my father to allow me to become a pupil to Mr. J. T. Leather, who was engineer of the Sheffield Waterworks. This was fortunate for my future career, as I had a thorough training

* A letter of congratulation from his old friend Mr. Bernard Wake, written to him on his being made a baronet in 1890, recalls to Sir John’s recollection “their sprightly movements to Hyde Park, Sheffield, to play cricket at six o’clock in the morning.” This “peep-of-day cricket” Mr. Wake dates about the year 1834.

in waterworks engineering, and set out and superintended in my capacity of pupil the Rivelin and Crookes reservoirs of the company, and all the business of pipe testing and pipe laying in every detail.

“During my pupilage I was frequently at Leeds with Mr. Leather’s uncle, who was engineer of the Great Aire and Calder Navigation, Goole Docks, etc., to give him assistance when he was much pressed with professional work.

“The result being that my early training was exclusively waterworks and hydraulic engineering; and before I was nineteen I was a good engineering surveyor and leveller, could set out works, and measure them up for certificates to be paid to contractors.”

This record of a healthy, happy boyhood, of a brief and by no means richly endowed school career, to be followed by a cycle of busy and yet joyous apprentice years, is commonplace enough. “Scientific” athleticism had not yet become a part of the school curriculum, and juvenile philanthropy was as yet unknown. There was no sign then of that introspective melancholy and sentiment which leads boys of this later generation to expend their energies in the study of social problems. Young Fowler’s surroundings, if not romantic, were sane and healthy. There were no misgivings in the air as to the soundness of the economic foundations of society. The future successful captain of industry was not one to allow his mind to be “sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,” and if misgiving ever occurred to him, his robust common sense would probably have told him that the career of a successful engineer (and of that his confident nature never doubted) would contribute more to the happiness and well-being of the world than many projects of philanthropy. To bring pure water to towns, to design works which would give

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employment to thousands, to abolish distance by means of improved locomotion, to make a home that should be a centre of domestic happiness, were objects which at that day appealed to and satisfied the generous instincts of youthful ambition. The air of Yorkshire and the neighbourhood of Sheffield were not favourable to brooding over the *Welt-Schmerz*. When Thoreau went out from the commercial atmosphere of an American city for which he had no taste, and set up his abode in a hut by the Lake of Walden, a life which he has immortalised in a charming fragment of autobiography, there were those of his fellow-townsmen who asked why, if the superfluities of civilisation were distasteful to him, he did not support an orphan. Such questions and such problems were not raised in Yorkshire in the early thirties. Young Fowler became an engineer because in the immediate future that profession seemed likely to be busy beyond all others. Neither sentimentalism nor an abnormally developed athleticism tempted him to decline his part in the workaday world, and the people of Sheffield, at that time at all events, did not put forward the claim of orphans. He became an engineer because it was the obvious thing to do, and he thoroughly enjoyed it.

In addition to the "elementary scholarship," to which allusion is made, there certainly was added a careful and reverent study of the Bible. Like many greater and smaller men, Fowler all his life was reticent on religious subjects, but throughout his correspondence, more especially in the letters written from Egypt many years afterwards, there is abundant evidence that he knew his Bible.

His scholarly equipment may have been narrow,

viewed in the light of modern educational theories; but it was sufficient to enable him to write a terse and vigorous style. The corrections which occur in his familiar correspondence are convincing evidence of a true literary instinct. Lucidity in even his most hurried composition is never wanting, and such corrections as are made are directed to the attainment of greater simplicity in the structure of a sentence and to a severe excision of redundancy of expression. As a result, his all too infrequent contributions on engineering matters to the Press and to periodical literature are admirable examples of popular scientific exposition.

It is a tradition in Sir John Fowler's family that as a child and a boy he was remarkable for his destructive habits. As the principal work of his life was to be construction on the largest and most successful scale, the contradiction is quoted to illustrate one of the generalisations of Froebel, viz. that the destructive faculty of youth can be trained and converted into the constructive talent of the adult and fully civilised man. Carefully considered in the light of evolutionary theory the paradox becomes a truism. Civilisation is the record of the conversion of those human instincts which Professor Huxley has described as those of the tiger and the ape into qualities appropriate to, or at least not incompatible with, our associated life, and it is a fact well known to biologists that the young of species show, even physically, traces of remote ancestry which disappear or become modified past recognition in the fully grown adult.

Fowler's childish success as a story-teller attests his youthful power of imagination. It might seem, and,