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The Worthies of Westminster

By

John S. MacIntosh, D.D.

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THE
WORTHIES OF WESTMINSTER

A CONTRIBUTION

TO THE

Celebration of the Two Hundred and Fiftieth
Anniversary of the Assembly of Divines
at Westminster

BY

JOHN S. MACINTOSH, D. D.



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THE
WORTHIES OF WESTMINSTER.

1643-1648.

THEY had been looking over old miniatures, silhouettes, and engravings, when she said to her husband, the professor, "Why, Sandy, I didn't know before that you had so many interesting ancestors."

"I didn't know it myself, Agnes, till a few weeks ago, when I opened the old oak chest."

It would be better if we children of Puritan and Presbyterian sires opened oftener the chests of our ancestors. We would honor them more. We should ourselves prove more worthy of our noble forefathers. Others would beyond all doubt treat us with more respect. Had we any just esti-

mate of our blood, we should more boldly speak to the enemy in the gate.

While the grand Puritans of the Jerusalem Chamber ought to be revered and to have their praises sung by the whole of widespread Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, to us Presbyterians of every land has fallen the largest share of the inheritance, and by us, therefore, should loudest and loftiest tributes be rendered.

To forget such is to defraud. Not to know is to write ourselves down both degenerate and untrue. Come, then, let us walk again the long length and gaze with reverent eyes and grateful heart on the thick-studded walls of the Westminster Gallery. Its shining names and its calm-wreathed faces of more than kingly strength are both joy and inspiration.

These colossal leaders of Britain's seventeenth century, these conscious masters of destinies and makers of a new world, political, social, spiritual, *whence came they? who are they? what are they? what wrought they?*

I. WHENCE CAME THEY?

Out of the anguish and the birth-throes of one of Britain's most passionate hours. Great ages bring forth large men. Blood tells. Breeding leaves its marks of distinction. When did these rich-fraught lives, looking down on us from Westminster's storied Jerusalem Chamber, reach their flower and their fruit? The very time is fate-laden. You are standing, as you front these faces of peaceful wisdom and revolutionary power, between the harvest months of the great Elizabeth and the spring days of the nearing Protectorate, when Cromwell should make the English Commons the rulers of the world. Verily, a mighty forcing-time for the growth of Great-hearts!

James, the self-lauding pedant, was gone from the throne; Charles, the self-made martyr, was sloping his way swift and straight to the fell block at Whitehall. Men's minds still felt the Elizabethan exhilaration. Englishmen spoke the speech

of Spenser and the just-retranslated Bible. They thrilled under the names of Drake and Raleigh and Sydney. They sang still of God's storm and the shattered Armada. They walked amid the scenic splendors of Shakespeare. Their souls beat high in answer to the bugle-notes of Milton's impassioned poetry and prose.

Those years, running from the death of James the First to the accession of Cromwell, the great uncrowned king whose monument is at last to find a place in Westminster, were the times when human life was at floodtide. Britain has never glowed to whiter heat. The fires burned fiercely in the resolute souls of the born leaders. They did indeed muse long and deep. When they spoke at last, their words were battle-cries, and when they struck, great Thor hammers fell, and kings died, and thrones tottered, and the Commons flung off the fetters of the Lauds and Straffords and Stuarts.

Then ran and raged such yeasty mountain-seas of struggle and debate and revolution in both

Britain and Ireland that it was only titanic swimmers who could keep heads above water and make the shore. The Commoners of the Long Parliament, like Falkland, Pym, Hampden, and Hollis; the resolute Covenanters of Scotland, like Melville, Buchanan, Gillespie, Henderson, Rutherford, and Argyll; the free-souled Colonists of Ulster, from whom should come "the Apprentice Boys of Derry,"—all were born of and belonged to that memorable first half of the seventeenth century. Out of that age, its fires and its forces, came the divines who formed at Westminster the greatest council which the Protestant world has so far known. And in them are seen the strongest energies, the most dazzling heroism, the ripest wisdom, and the deepest devotion of that distinguished era.

II. WHO ARE THEY?

The flower of British life. They are picked men. They are chosen for quality, dignity, and ability. There came from England sixteen

peers of the realm, thirty members of the House of Commons, including several knights, and about one hundred and forty clerical members. Scotland sends six ministers and nine elders, nearly all of whom are peers. And as special member, by courtesy, there sits on several occasions the Prince Elector Palatine, and probably also Dr. Manton.

On the second front bench, beside the Prolocutor's chair, you see the Earls of Northumberland, Bedford, Salisbury, and Malmesbury, and next are Viscounts Say and Conway. Yonder is the Lord General, the Earl of Essex, and a few seats beyond is the Lord High Admiral, Earl Warwick. There are the "five Johns," as the great Selden and Pym, with their colleagues, Glynn, White, and Clotworthy, are called. The keen, clear-cut face of Oliver St. John, the great Crown lawyer, now catches our eye. There is the dashing Harry Vane and his friend, the courtly Evelyn.

The Scotch elders are the distinguished Earl of

Cassilis, the able Lord Maitland, the "martyr Marquis," Archibald of Argyll, and with these are Loudon, Erskine, and Johnstone.

We have English bishops and the Archbishop of Armagh; Deans; Masters of Colleges; Professors; Rectors; Preachers at Lincoln's and Gray's Inns; and Fellows of Oxford and Cambridge.

Of the divines wellnigh all are beneficed clergy of the Church of England.

And right famous are their names. The subtle and speculative Twisse, the Prolocutor, marvel of learning even in that age; the eloquent and judicious Reynolds; Calamy, soul of sweetness and light; the quaint Arrowsmith, "with the glass eye;" the pugnacious Nye; the voluminous Goodwin; the laborious Gouge; the logical Wallis; the magnetic Marshall; with Palmer "of the paradoxes," and Gataker, pioneer in New Testament literature, and Lightfoot, the great Orientalist.

Time would fail to tell of the whole band; but almost every one, like "the Morning and Even-

ing Stars of Stepney," and the "Lawyer's Counsel" at Lincoln's, and Hoyle, the coveted ornament of both Oxford and Dublin, had won names of high distinction.

Nor came behind one whit the small band from the Church of Scotland, whose martyred Hamilton, and gracious Wishart, and peerless Knox, and dauntless Melville had made possible and precipitated for Britain and the world the new day for free consciences, schools, and churches.

There was that heaven-born son of consolation, Samuel Rutherford, with all the Schoolmen's lore in his capacious mind and the glory-light of Immanuel's land on his saintly face. With him George Gillespie, a very Rupert in the onset of debate, a Gamaliel in cautious counsel, "the young Solomon of our Kirk."

The third of the mighties was Alexander Henderson, more than match for the craftiest of king's statesmen, whose piercing eye was feared even by the subtle Wentworth, and whose wide-ranging but thorough learning Paris vied with Geneva in

crowning with honor. Supporting with chivalrous loyalty their honored and beloved ministers were Argyll, faithful unto death, the scarred hero Meldrum, the astute Loudon, the fascinating Maitland, and the sagacious Johnstone of rock-like steadiness.

There is one other name which no lover of sacred letters, of broad-minded toleration, and of honorable church unity dare ever forget—the saintly and statesman-like James Ussher, Archbishop of Armagh, who did once make possible the harmony and union of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism.

III. WHAT ARE THEY?

The peers of the first statesmen and scholars of the hour. The gravest questions in high statecraft must be debated by that Assembly in Jerusalem Chamber. The most delicate and peril-fraught relations between Church and State must be adjusted and harmonized. Far-reaching moral and social conditions and obligations must be defined and balanced. The deepest

mysteries in theology and the most sacred truths of revelation wait for full and accurate statement. Divisive and difficult features of church policy must be calmly studied, satisfactorily presented, and wisely adjusted.

The councils and the colleges of Europe owned at once the statesmen-like excellencies and the scholarly preëminence of the Assembly dealing with these high and perplexing themes.

They were independent British thinkers and theologians. They were not overlaid by France, Switzerland, Holland, or Germany. Neither Calvin nor Cocceius, neither Melancthon nor Turretin, neither Beza nor Bullinger, did they call master. They knew thoroughly all the older and contemporaneous scholarship and theology of the schools and masters of continental Europe, for several of them had been both students and professors in the great universities. But they were native, British, independent, as they examined, debated, and finally formulated theological views and confessional declarations. Mitchell, Killen,

Herzog, and Stanley, in Europe, and Briggs, Hodge, and Schaff, in our own land, have established this fact.

They were men of patient toil. To use their own favorite term, they were "painfull students of the truth." Hasty work at no time did they approve for God's house. Beaten oil they must have always for the sanctuary. And in their solemn convocation at Westminster they knew that they were required by the Parliament, the Reformed Church, and the King and Head of the Church, to give their very best to the spiritual enlightenment of their own age and the guidance and determination of the true faith for generations to come.

Day after day was given to prayer for guidance, to most careful searching of the Word, and to keen debate as to the exact truth and the most perfect forms of expression. Very thoroughly and patiently was the work done.

Then followed months of calm consideration and thoughtful revision.

Thus weeks and months were these picked biblical scholars, these trained theologians, these life-long and God-fearing expositors busied on the several sections of the Confession, till four long years were consumed.

During the months of September and October, London, which had become the hotbed of reform, civil and religious, had been seething in the fires of an intense and widespread agitation for "the restoration and revival of a pure faith." A remarkable cry, called "The Root-and-Branch Petition," went up from the heart of fifteen thousand London citizens to Parliament praying that all forms of episcopal government might be destroyed and the hierarchy ended—"with all its dependencies—roots and branches."

In connection with this famous petition, though not wholly in consequence of it, the two Houses by hearty and unanimous vote appointed on the 6th day of November, 1640, "the Grand Committee on Religion." To this committee of the Commons was added by the Lords a committee of

ten bishops and twenty peers, under the lately released Bishop Williams.

This dual committee selected a number of learned divines for the better information of the Lords and the Commons. The result of the joint deliberations was a resolution to call a convocation or assembly to purge the Prayer book and reform religion.

Ordinances were passed by Parliament in June, 1643, that the Assembly should be called to meet on the first day of July.

From that midsummer day of 1643 until the 4th of December, 1646, that conscientious and critical body of divines labored upon the Confession with "so great pains that thanks were returned by both Lords and Commons."

On Dec. 7th an order was passed for the printing of 600 copies for the special use of Parliament.

By April of the following year the edition, with the scriptural proofs commanded by the Commons, was issued as—

“The Humble Advice of the Assembly of Divines now by Authority of Parliament sitting at Westminster—

“Concerning a confession of faith, with the quotations and texts of Scripture annexed.”

The Larger Catechism was accepted by Parliament, Oct. 22, 1647, with a special vote of thanks “for the great labour and pains in compiling this Long Catechism.”

On the 25th of November the House of Commons, and on the 26th the House of Lords, received and approved—

“The Grounds and Principles of Religion contained in a Shorter Catechism (according to the advice of the Assembly of Divines sitting at Westminster), to be used throughout the kingdom of England and the dominion of Wales.”

To this, our most estimable Shorter Catechism, proofs were added on April 15, 1648.

The Church of Scotland accepted and approved it on July 28, 1648.

Four years of the best thought, of the ripest

scholarship, of the fullest biblical knowledge of these preëminent divines are embodied in their most noble and still potent declarations. Thorough work lasts: theirs was thorough, and it has lasted.

They were masters of English speech. Too little attention has been given to the choice diction, the calm majesty, the elevated precision, the clean-cut clauses, the compact logic, the symmetric build, the rare rhythm, and the frequent quiet beauty of the Confession and the Catechisms. Here is prose worthy of the early days of our rhythmic and familiar Version and of the stately and sonorous prose of Milton in his "Liberty." There are few passages like that on the Word of God. And in the Catechisms there are sentences which DeQuincey or Macaulay or Ruskin or Stevenson might envy for their swing and sweetness.

They were pioneers on the pathway of toleration. We have heard much of late regarding the harshness of certain utterances, of the excess of subtlety, of the over-refinement of definition, of

the lack of love and sweetness and charity. While not denying that there is a measure of truth in the charge, I put in a threefold plea of extenuation. Too often the old polemics, who were fighting for free air, if not for life, are misunderstood. Their sentences are not always studied as articulated parts of a complex but compact body. But, third and chief, the careful study of "the minutes" does prove that again and yet again they rejected the harsher and chose the softer; they excluded the extreme and inserted the modified and balanced; they gave the broadest view of the Church of God and the most comprehensive view of Scripture, and laid down principles whose honest application and logical extension are seen in the large charity and growing catholicity of generous Presbyterianism all over the world. The comprehensiveness of the great "Alliance" is the present-day proof of the genial principles and generous possibilities imbedded in the declarations of the Westminster divines.

IV. WHAT DID THEY DO?

Indirectly so much as only a volume could tell. But directly they wrought the following mighty and manifold works:

They summed up and concentrated the ripest scholarship of their day, and made it tell on the highest of all themes.

There were men in that company, like Hoyle and Wallis, and Lightfoot and Rutherford, who were sought as professors by the most famous universities of Europe. Very many of the masters of colleges and of the professors were acknowledged leaders of thought and expert authorities in special departments. The broadest culture and the most profound learning of their day belonged to those divines; and all these acquisitions they conscientiously consecrated to their sacred profession, and, without reserve, devoted to the solution of the theological and ecclesiastical questions submitted to them by the churches and the Parliament. And their chief inducement

was to find and state the fullest and loftiest truth for the enlightenment and the uplifting of their day. The aspiration and the consecration were sublime.

They systematized theology, and so made exact teaching in the churches possible. Starting from the highly esteemed Articles of the Irish Church as formulated by Ussher and his friends, for these are "certainly the main source of the Westminster Confession, and almost its exact prototype in the enunciation of all the more important doctrines of the Christian system," the Westminster divines had before them the works of the Scotch theologians, Rollock and Howie, the treatises of Ball, and the teaching of Cartwright, Travers, Preston, and others. There is good reason for Mitchell's statement that the Confessions of the French, Belgian, and other Reformed churches, were all carefully considered, and, as the result, a system of theology devised so logical and compact that it is almost impossible to revise and reshape it, so clear and definite as to make debate on its meanings well nigh

useless. Who does not know that these Confessions and Catechisms gave to Scotland and Ulster pulpits teaching so exact that the very peasants became acute theologians and no mean metaphysicians?

They gave to childhood its rightful place in the Church and a perfectly unique manual. By no council in the history of the universal Church had the children ever before been recognized as worthy of not only special consideration, but also of the ripest wisdom, the finest lessons, the very essence of finished thinking of a council of divines. The Catechisms, and especially the Shorter, were the last work, some not unfairly say the noblest trophy, the richest and rarest fruit, of this never-surpassed Assembly. By them the Master's command, "Feed my lambs," received loving attention and unstinted fulfillment.

They effected the union of British Protestantism and the alliance of the Reformed churches of Europe. At, and by, and after, that council and Confession there was practical union of Protestants

in England, Ireland, and Scotland. They stood together, bound in one "Solemn League and Covenant," and voicing one great Confession. And the great legislators aimed and designed that it should be, as it did prove, "a bond of union among those who were determined to hold fast by the sum and substance of the doctrine of the Reformed churches."

They gave birth to the three Mastermen of Freedom. These were the Nonconformists of England, the Covenanters of Scotland, and the Lowland colonists of Ulster. Thus they made possible our great republic, wherein Puritan, Covenanter, and Ulsterman, blending with Cavalier and German, Huguenot and Hollander, have given to the world the new man, our composite American.

So the way was opened for the coming democracy of the happier future and the fraternal federation of the world.

Lay the chaplets on their honored graves; tell their names with solemn praise; bless the God

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who gave them. Their memories are an inspiration; their works and gifts a precious legacy; their aspirations and their hopes our impulsive obligation; the crown and completion of their yet unfinished toil our glory and reward..

What a splendid and thrilling anniversary were this if only it saw the Union of the Presbyterians of this land and the Federation of the worldwide Protestantism!

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