

BALDWIN BROWN
A TRIBUTE, REMINISCENCE
AND A STUDY

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BALDWIN BROWN.

A TRIBUTE, A REMINISCENCE, AND A STUDY.

Given at St. Thomas's Chapel, Hackney, on July 6.

BY REV. P. T. FORSYTH, M.A.

"My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof."—2 Kings ii. 12.

I am sure I truly speak the heart-feeling of at least the younger generation of Independents, of the men who will give us our colour twenty years hence, when I put it in these words of Elisha to his departing master. They express the two elements which so endeared Baldwin Brown to us and made him at a very important period of our lives a power over us. These elements were his noble, truly paternal kindness, and his driving prophetic ardour of insight and inspiration.

No man among us in this generation possessed the same power of inspiration, nor do I think of any who had the same amount of that specific form of genius so beautifully illustrated in Dean Stanley—the genius of being beloved.

No pupil of Baldwin Brown (and he was himself one of our Colleges) was likely to be unduly influenced by any mere document, institution, or organization. To him Christianity was the gospel of free individuality, and the great Church, the fraternity of the emancipated, the redeemed, the realized, who had received their own souls for a prey. And the subjects that attracted and

engrossed him were in keeping. His chosen and special field was history. He had the historic sense. Theology fascinated him on its anthropological side. Everything centred in the Incarnation, in the historic God.

It is easy to see what a power this gave him in his preaching and in his general effort to “wed theology to life.” It was what God had done for man in history that made for him the fascination of the past. It was what God was still doing for us in history that gave him such a vivid interest in and command of the politics of the present. And it was this same sense of God in history that led him to a concern so keen and practical with the social situation of the present.

His congregation has for years carried on a splendid work among the poor of Lambeth, officered first by his daughter and next by an admirable City Missionary. They built an excellent Hall, before the present movement for Mission Halls in the lowest neighbourhoods were heard of. It is called the Moffat Institute, after the well known Missionary whose membership at Brixton during his latter years Mr. Brown was so proud of, and whose eloquent, bent head in that front pew was a sermon in itself. But it was no mere zeal for “evangelizing the masses,” as that is so often understood, that inspired the man who inspired this work. It had its root in his deep, deep sense of God in the present, God there in these worn or imbruted or helpless men and women, God in this great laden nation and society of which they were an indispensable part. To him in a very deep and philosophic sense they were Christ’s poor. They were an integral part of a society which had its right and power to exist only in virtue of the indwelling and inworking of the Redeeming Son of God. It was not condescension to bring these people the Gospel. It was brotherhood. It was only in a cautious sense that it was pity. There was no going *down* to them ; it was stretching a hand *across*. And it was very pleasant to see Mr. Brown amid this same brotherhood. His outstretched hand and his breezy, manly, natural interest in these men and women, was indeed like a sunshine in a shady place, or the blue sky above a Borough close.

I remember with what zest and humour he used to read them scraps of Edwin Waugh’s racy Lancashire ‘Coom Whoam to t’ Childer and Me,’ or, ‘The Dules i’ this Bannet o’ Mine.’

He was deeply concerned about the upgrowing children; their miserable feeding and puny frames made him anxious about the physique of England in a few generations. He had physiological information that two meat meals or three a week would prevent fatal deterioration, and the providing of these meals was an important part of the work at Lambeth. This is a fair example, but only one, of the way in which he brought large interests and imperial considerations to prescribe and sustain what otherwise might be mere sentimental activity. But his whole mind was of cosmopolitan scope, and moved on the scale of nothing less than the Kingdom of God.

It was the same deep faith in the historic God that gave him his hope and belief in the future, and his sympathy with the young men who possess the future. His youthfulness of spirit was no mere outflow of an elastic natural man. He trusted in an unwearable God, who to every generation was more and more. To us juniors he was always young, and always, till he became ill, accessible. It was new life to come from the dogmatists with their exclusions, their system of checks and air of suspicion, to this great generous believer and comprehensive anti-comprehensionist. No religion will gain youth which is not a generous one, and no other religion will make men of youths. It is self accusation when a creed complains that it is losing the young. I never went from him but cheered and sobered, and sometimes exalted—always with the satisfaction (mingled sometimes with pain) of being understood. He believed in us, and to be believed in by some divine spirit is the root of all faith and high emprise, the source of the best severity of self-scrutiny and self-discipline. It is the intelligent benignity of God that stirs us to our very best sternness with ourselves.

Mr. Brown was a power *over* us, because he was so much *of* us. And this we may take as another proof of the way in which he had lived himself into the principle of the Incarnation. The mother of Goethe, who bore him at eighteen, used to say with tender humour, "I am fond of my Wolfgang, we were young together." Well, *we* were young together. That reflection casts a gleam and a smile upon our losses. We do not preach enough upon the gaiety of Faith as an argument for Immortality, as the unconscious sense of Eternity, the grace of its power and the index of spiritual indestructibility. We do

not realize as we might the solemn gladness on the 'purple brow of Olivet' even with Gethsemane just below.

It was in this region of history to which I have been alluding that Baldwin Brown's scholarship lay, and his philosophy shone. His knowledge, especially in the Christian history of Europe, was close, and his handling brilliant. It is deeply to be regretted that he did not live to give the world the work which he had long meditated, and which would probably have been his greatest legacy to us, on the Kingdom of God. Its philosophy is hinted at in what many consider the ablest of all his works, which should be every Independent's text-book, 'First Principles of Ecclesiastical Truth.' He was speaking to me once about the title for the projected book, and if Maurice had not pre-empted it, he would have liked as title 'The Kingdom of Christ.'

Such a book would have been far more than a church history. Mere church history had little attraction for him. He had no great admiration for church tactics or tacticians. He had nothing in him of the ecclesiastical politician, an order of character which, except when it rose to heroic proportions, as in the case of some of the great Popes, he came as near despising as he could despise anything. "The bane of Christianity is the Churches," he said, in the last long conversation which I had with him. It was a strong expression, but then he was a strong man, and a strong and perfectly consistent Independent. Like the greatest Christian prophetic figures, he began his judgment with the House of God, and thought it was more profitable to be severe on the Church than on the world. If the greatest crime in history is the murder of Christ, it was the Church of the day that perpetrated it.

Mr. Brown was much more of a prophet than a mystic or a metaphysician. But the prophet's inspiration is not only passionately moral, it is also imaginative and ideal. Now, Mr. Brown was both. He was an idealist, not, of course, in the sense of being a dreamer—no man was ever less of a mere dreamer—but as being a man with an affinity for ideas. And he brought to theology one faculty whose absence has done more than most things to discredit that science—imagination. It was this ideal and imaginative power in him which softened the edge of dogma and kept it to its true place. It gave his

theology a background and an atmosphere. It gave his mind a horizon, and his thinking light and shade. For us it gave him a halo. And it gave him a horror of mere rationalism, and preserved him from the baldness that so easily besets us. This fine sense was marked in his relation to public prayer. I spoke with him once after a long retirement in the course of which he had more opportunity than usual of hearing extempore prayers, and he was painfully impressed with the flatness and jejuneness which continually trembled on the verge of familiarity, and betrayed a sad poverty of anything like spiritual imagination. His own preference was for the grand old forms, and his prayers were mainly borrowed from the liturgies or from Scripture. It was his affinity for ideas with a fascination for the imagination, that was at the basis of all his culture. Every doctrine for him expanded into a divine idea, as every such idea again had its expression in some doctrine which gave it a quality of absoluteness and fact. Thus theology was for him, not the enemy, but the chief agent of culture.

There is after all but one agent of culture. It is not literature alone or science, but ideas. And it is only a religion with an ideal range and spell, a religion built on real ideas about the Divine Man, a religion of the very largest and most generous interests, that can hope to be the grand educator of the human spirit. It is this ideal element in religion that gives it its affinity for all the glories of human achievement, and its power, with fearless and hospitable mind, to assimilate the endless processes of spiritual growth. He gave Independence the one touch which it lacks to commend it to the age and forestall the influential scepticism. And that is, with all its old truth, and new philanthropy to blend the charm of ideality.

A certain amount of his influence, especially in the championship of unpopular causes, was lost through a not uncommon notion that this chivalry was no more than a noble idiosyncrasy, not to say an eccentricity. It is curious to mark in how many references to him since his death, this constant knightliness of his has been treated with an air of generous indulgence, as if it were something that got the better of him, a mere unbridled passion of Quixotic magnanimity which a sounder and stronger man would have controlled. Well, there is much of this self-control about, but the theory I believe to be, in Mr. Brown's

case, a mistake. It *was* the instinct of his fine militancy to leave the gods the conquering side, and take the conquered for his own. But he was not the man to live in such matters the life of mere instinct. He had something of Maurice's suspicion of popular religion, and was inclined to think there must be something good, and for the hour very necessary, in a man whom the societies and the denominations united to taboo. As soon as a truth became established, it almost seemed as if he thought the form of it so stamped ought to be watched with some vigilance of distrust, and much freedom encouraged in its criticism. His own experience had given him a fellow-feeling with those who do not enter on a position of influence, but have to earn it by laborious work and hard fighting. It pleased him to think how he had conquered public confidence step by step, and won his opponents to see and admit by the honour they paid him, that a Christian zeal and gospel at least equal to their own, could exist under forms to them unintelligible or dangerous. He was near enough to them essentially to give him a greater leverage in the liberal direction, than men who go much farther only to leave more behind. This is one reason why his influence has been so great and beneficent within the religious world. He had every reason in history and experience to esteem the value of minorities, and to wish to clear a free space on every occasion for the tender plant, formless and uncomely, that might grow into a tree with leaves innumerable for the healing of nations. His chivalry was no mere outburst of generosity. It was with him not a peculiarity but a principle. It was part of the delicate, no less than vigorous, enthusiasm of justice, which is exposed to so much danger from the enthusiasms of religion.

But in Mr. Brown this chivalry had its roots deeper even than the principle of justice. It flowed from the nature of his faith in the Incarnation, and it indicates a mode of viewing that great fact which many of his fellow Independents found, and still find, not only unfamiliar, but obscure, and where lucid, untrue. I suppose it is true to say that in the long run, the practice of any body of Christians will be found to be determined more by their view of this central doctrine than by anything else. If their habit of mind have a straitened, jealous, and nervous complexion, it is safe to infer that it is associated with

some defect and impoverishment in their view of their greatest trust. The heart will not only be *with*, but *as* the treasure. Now, Mr. Brown's large and confiding policy was one that flowed naturally and inevitably from the centre of his Christian system. To him the Incarnation was a historic fact, which was not merely past, but eternal, and so everywhere and always present in mankind. Man was constituted in Christ. He is supernatural in his very nature. All his growth, truth, and achievement of glory is due to Christ that dwelleth in him. When the historic Christ came to human nature, He came to His own. The spirit of man is not something that is developed, only in the pale of the Church, or under conditions of conscious personal Christianity. There are other sheep that are not of that fold, and they not only hear Christ's voice, but are often the organs for its utterance. The Incarnation, if it may in some sense be spoken of as a moral miracle, is yet in a deeper sense the moral base and spiritual constitution of mankind.

It is a fact which works and redeems even where it is not believed, and some of its real operations take the shape of criticism, or even denial of the forms in which for the hour it is conceived. Thus, to Mr. Brown it was not a theory but a fact. In a multitude of unfamiliar ways Christ was still appearing on the earth; God was speaking, working, redeeming; He was invoking in a tongue still, as in old Judea, strange, lonely, and rejected, the help of His truest servants against the mob of the mighty. Now as ever, the communion of Christ and His sufferings meant the fellowship, and on occasion, the championship of the insignificant, and a disposition to believe in forlorn hopes. 'When the Christ cometh no man knoweth whence He is.' "Wherefore I say unto you watch, for in such a day and hour as ye know not, the Son of Man cometh."

The more the Incarnation becomes a human fascination, and the less it is treated as a temple palladium, so much the more will it be realized as a divine power. It will operate less as a test to exclude, and more as an inspiration empowering us to interpret, co-ordinate, and comprehend. That seemed to me how it worked in the greatest Independent of our time. It was the key note of his character no less than of his creed. It prescribed his chivalry no less than his faith. It approved itself a divine idea and power by the vital warmth, the concrete

realism, and the air of great affairs which it gave to his activities) as if the world had been set in his heart. It had more than anything else to do with making a man of him to us. For there is nothing makes such men as the faith that God is man.

The following passage from a letter which I have preserved will be first-hand authority for some of the statements I have made. It contains his views on the propriety of meeting on the same platform, on such an occasion as, for example, a recognition service, members of the Unitarian ministry :—

“With regard to my Unitarian brethren, the question is, I frankly confess, not without its difficulty. But it seems to me that just now ‘Unitarian’ is the vaguest of terms. I know many Unitarians who seem to me to approach very closely indeed to us, while others drift away in the direction of what, I am well persuaded, must in the end be the abyss of all noble and faithful life. It seems to me that a willingness to meet them on an occasion like this (on which he had been consulted), when they know perfectly well what are our beliefs, is wise and Christian, and may be a means of helping some to what, we cannot but believe, is the more excellent way. But I feel the difficulty of the question, and I feel for the difficulties of my brethren. But my rule is, in a case of difficulty, to act on the side of trust and charity; in the end it is quite sure to be right. I grieve that so many excellent Christians seem always to lean, in such a case, to the side of suspicion and fear. I think it is a great mistake, and that it has very much to do with the bitter feeling of the Agnostic school against the Christian faith as a narrow, timid, and selfish form of belief, doggedly opposed to all true reform and progress. Until Christians believe that what they hold to be truth must conquer in its contact with error, instead of fearing that it must fail, what hope is there of a vital progress of the Kingdom of Heaven in the world. When shall we understand that, and come, not to organize a system of safeguards, but to quicken in men a free, vigorous, victorious life.”

It is almost a sufficient account of Baldwin Brown’s differentia to say that he believed in truth. Nor is there a deeper need of the religious world than the identification of the Truth and truth.

I do not venture to suppose that Mr. Brown had adjusted completely in his own mind all the aspects of his central faith.

There were two sides to him, as he drew two classes of people towards him. He had about him those who went farther than he did, and those who could not go so far. He had himself no timidity in his theology or elsewhere, but for a man of his stamp he was singularly free from temerity, and he felt that forced and hurried adjustments were worse, because hollower, than no adjustment at all. The disposition shown by some of his eulogists to minimise the differences which separated him from them, was not in his own strain at all. He would have felt that it savoured of that insincere desire to make things smooth all round, which is such a crime of the ecclesiastical world. Differences, like men, exist to be reconciled not erased—to be left standing and growing in a larger unity—a unity where they are not lost, but only properly placed.

He was accused sometimes of an excess of melancholy in his preaching, and was thought by some to be unduly detained by the sadder aspect of things. This was due to his keen and eager feeling. It was further a result of his deep insight into the meaning of Redemption—especially what it meant for God. The joy of the Incarnation was tempered and chastened by the sombre shadows of the Cross—which represented, not a redemptive expedient, but an eternal factor in the nature of God. God Himself was the archetype of all sacrifice, and the first, chief, and last of all sufferers. Baldwin Brown believed in no easy Gospel, in no God who accepted sacrifices greater than He Himself made, in no forgiveness which was in its generosity a mere piece of good nature. It *was* hard for God to redeem, however freely He might forgive, and the whole travail of Creation was the reflection of the Divine pain and sorrow in the joyful task. It was no world of mere gaiety on which the Cross of Christ had once stood. It was no mere limpid and sparkling, air that had once been pierced by the Redeemer's cry. And the heart, in God or man, that that cry had pierced, could be merely cheery no more, but must henceforth for ever shine with a solemn joy if it rejoiced at all, and smile smiles blended of a thousand awful records and pathetic memories.

Baldwin Brown always carried about with him the sense of what civilization and progress costs, as Paul bore about continually the dying of the Lord Jesus, and he seemed never to cease hearing the friction of the human spirit as it ground along

the heavy grooves of change, and became developed, or, as he preferred to say, redeemed. His favourite definition of man was, that he was a being born to be redeemed, an heir of pain and glory, to come only by sorrow to rest. He would have none of that deputy piety which, treating a vicarious sacrifice as a substitutionary victim, suffers by proxy and enjoys in person.

I find it hard to utter a memorial of Baldwin Brown which shall not cease to be an estimate, and continually melt into an eulogy. But no character like his can be really honoured by an exaggerated and indiscriminate praise. Assuredly it is not intended to do him that injustice here. It is not asserted that he possessed every quality of the first order of Christian character. There are figures, for example, marked by a repose and deliberate strength foreign to the restlessness of Mr. Brown's temper. Whatever he may have been to us Independents—and I think he is our greatest since the 17th century—it might be overstrained to describe him as being, for the world the "spiritual splendour" which Mr. Gladstone described Maurice to be. But to place him in the second order of Christian character seems to consecrate, in the ranks of the great Christian hierarchy, a sharpness of gradation foreign to the nature of the spiritual scale. Let it rather be said how much was in him to remind us of the greatest Christian names. We think of the unusual blending in him of ethical passion, spiritual insight, intellectual grasp, and personal piety. We think how admirable is his union of fine morality and masculine religion, of apostolicity and fairness, faith and charity. There may be many as eager for justice, and not a few more seraphic in mystical piety. He was more of Paul than of John. But there are very few whose ethical and religious inspiration are at once so balanced and so intense, so leavened with the light of mind, so braced with the vigour of understanding, and so sweetened by the large culture and the lovingkindness of the fairest humanities.