GEORGE BORROW

by Henry Charles Beeching

Beeching's scholarly examination of the life and literary works of George Borrow, the nineteenth-century English writer, traveler, and agent of the British and Foreign Bible Society known for his adventures distributing Scripture across Europe and his vivid travel narratives.

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"As for me, I would seek unto God, which doeth great things and unsearchable; marvellous things without number." -- Jobv. 8. You may desire some explanation of why we in this Cathedral, have thought it right to take part with the city in the public commemoration of George Borrow. It is not, of course, merely because he was a devoted lover of our ancient house, though for that we are not ungrateful. Nor again is it merely because he was for the most active years of his life a zealous servant of the Bible Society; and our Church has taken a special interest in that society since the day when Bishop Bathurst, first of his episcopal brethren, appeared upon its platforms side by side with Joseph John Gurney. Nor again is it merely because he was an accomplished man of letters. Religion and literature indeed have much that is common in their purpose. The Church exists to propagate a certain interpretation of the world and human life. Literature also exists to interpret life, and the great literatures of the world have never in their interpretations shown themselves antagonistic to religion; on the contrary, they have always tended to discover more and more elements of permanent value in human life, confirming the Church's message of its Divine origin and destiny. But, unhappily, there have always been, and are still, men of letters whom the Church cannot honour, because their books, although technically meritorious, take a view of life which is in our judgment against good morals, or in some other way mischievous. If, then, we in this Mother Church claim our share in the commemoration of George Borrow, it is because he was, as we think, a true seer and interpreter; because he opened to us fresh springs of delight in the natural world; because he aroused new and living interest in the lives of men of many kindreds and tongues; and because he held up to our own nation an ideal of conduct which could not but benefit those whom it attracted. Let me, as shortly as I can, remind you of some characteristics of that ideal. Every reader of the Old Testament is familiar with the two great types which the early Israelitish civilisation sets before us again and again in Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Esau and Jacob -- the contrast of the wild and vagabond hunter and the "plain man, dwelling in tents." These types as they appear in the Bible have in them a characteristically Semitic element, but they have still more of our common humanity. We observe the two types among our own children, and it is a contrast that interests us all. Our affections perhaps go out to the romantic Esau rather than to his business-like brother; while at the same time we recognise that the future of civilisation must lie not with the child of impulse, but with him who can forecast the future and rank something higher than his momentary whim. It was this fundamental contrast that was so interesting to Borrow. He studied it in the cities and in the wildernesses of this and many other lands; and because he studied it he was not content to accept the easy verdict of civilisation that finds nothing but profanity in Esau, or the equally easy paradox of a return-to- nature philosophy, which finds all virtue in the noble savage. Borrow studied Esau in his wandering life with interested eyes, and won his confidence and a glimpse of his secret; and he studied Jacob in his counting house and workshop with no less understanding, if with a less degree of sympathy; and then he exhibited to his countrymen an ideal which at the time vexed and disquieted them, because there were elements in it drawn from both. Look first at those which he drew from his intercourse with the gipsies. He was puzzled by the problem of their wonderful persistence. What could be its cause?

Their faults were proverbs. They lived by drawing fools into a circle and cheating them. Stealing and lying were first principles in their code of life. And yet because Borrow held that Nature did not forgive faults, much less allow men to profit by them, he could not but ask whether those gipsies were so thoroughly vicious as was supposed. One day, in a conversation with a gipsy girl under a hedge -- one of the strangest talks in the chronicle of literature -- he elicited the fact that domestic honour was held among them to be a primary law, and female unchastity an unpardonable offence. And he left that conversation on record for our admonition. That, you will say, is no new ideal to English women. As an ideal, no. But our English practice is something very different. And we have lived to see literature challenge even the ideal. And then there was the secret, an open one indeed, but hidden from many Englishmen of Borrow's generation, though it had been recently proclaimed by the gentle and thoughtful poet who lay buried in Borrow's native town of Dereham, that though civilisation arose from life in cities, yet the joy of life was apt to escape the city liver. The vagabond gipsy had something which man was the better for having, a delight in the sun and air and wind and rain. We in Norwich are not likely to forget those magical words put into the mouth of the gipsy on Mousehold Heath, "There's night and day, brother, both sweet things; sun, moon, and stars, brother, all sweet things; there's likewise a wind on the heath. Life is very sweet, brother." Allied with this love of nature was a keen satisfaction in manly exercises, walking, riding, boxing, swimming, which Borrow contrasted somewhat scornfully with the baser sports of dog fighting and cock fighting, then in vogue among gentlemen. And as a consequence of this love of the open air and the open country Borrow found in the gipsies a sense of freedom and independence, and so a self- respect, which he compared unfavourably with the mingled arrogance and servility of many city-bred people. Here then we have some of the elements of the ideal, largely drawn from the despised gipsies, which Borrow held up before his generation. He does not indeed promulgate it as the whole duty of man, though we who have learned the lesson may think he is apt to over-emphasise it. He does not ignore other qualities of manliness. He holds that from the root of a self-respecting freedom, if the environment be but favourable, as with the gipsies it was not, other manly qualities will spring. From the strength of self-respect should spring the courage of truthfulness, and justice, and tenderness, and perseverance. On the love of truth and justice I need not dwell; they are conspicuous in every page that Borrow wrote. Perseverance is still more emphasised, because it was the main contribution of Jacob to the human ideal, the quality most lacking in Esau. Tenderness may seem to be less evident; and I know it is a common opinion that Borrow's ideal of life was too self-absorbed to allow of much sympathy with others. I think this view is mistaken. There was undoubtedly a strong stress laid on the duty of protecting one's own life and personality from outside influence, and a corresponding stress on the duty of respect for the independence of others; but where there was a claim, whether of blood, or friendship, or need, Borrow's ideal admitted it to the full. I have wished to confine myself this morning to the ideal of conduct which Borrow offers us in his books, because it was a conscious and reasoned ideal, and he wrote to propagate it. The question how far he himself attained to his own standard we are right in passing by unless there was any conspicuous contrast between his theory and his practice. But there was no such contrast. So far as our information goes, Borrow lived by his ideal resolutely. His truthfulness and perseverance and love of justice cannot be questioned; and on the point of tenderness it is not those who knew him best -- his mother, or his wife, or his friends -- who have found him wanting. Let me pass on to indicate how this ideal connected itself with religion. The fundamental dogma of Borrow's religion was the providence of

God. So far as I know, he did not formulate his notion of the purpose of the world; he accepted the view of St. Paul, that the creation is moving to some "divine event"; and that within the great scheme there are numberless subservient ends which man is being urged by Divine admonition to fulfil. Such admonitions come to men in many ways; we speak of them as modes of inspiration; and even those who question the inspiration of prophets do not refuse the word in speaking of poets and musicians. Borrow did not question prophetic inspiration in the past, because he believed in it as a present fact. He believed that to the man who by prayer kept himself in touch with the Divine Spirit intimations were vouchsafed of the Divine will, which brought clear light into the dark places of life. He somewhat shocked the good but precise secretary of the Bible Society by declaring in a letter from Spain that he had been "very passionate in prayer during the last two or three days," and in consequence, as he thought, saw his way "with considerable clearness": on another occasion, by saying that he was "what the world calls exceedingly superstitious" because he had changed some plan in consequence of a dream; and again by saying, "My usual wonderful good fortune accompanied me." For the last expression he apologised; but, whatever the particular expression used, there can be no doubt that Borrow was a firm believer in what our fathers called "particular providences," "leadings of the Divine Spirit." He believed, for example, that he was doing the will of God in circulating the Bible, and he also believed that God made his way plain for so doing. We have known since Borrow another great Englishman who held a similar faith, Charles Gordon; and the lives of both supply so many instances of what look like acts of special protection, that the question will present itself to the student of their lives whether there may not be some such connexion between faith and miracle, as our Saviour asserted. At any rate, we shall never understand Borrow if we exclude from our notion of religion the idea of the miraculous, meaning by that word not the contravention of natural law, but the providential guidance of events. There is one special side of this doctrine of Providence which must be referred to specially, because Borrow himself calls attention to it in the curious commentary which he annexed to "The Romany Rye"; the doctrine so familiar to the last generation in the poems of Browning, that trouble, to which "man is born, as the sparks fly upward," is ordained by the Creator as a stimulus to endeavour, because "where least man suffers, longest he remains." Some of you may remember that he argues in that appendix that the old man who had learnt Chinese to distract his mind would have played but a sluggard's part in life if no affliction had befallen him, since he had never taken the pains to learn how to tell the time from a clock. "Nothing but extreme agony," says Borrow, "could have induced such a man to do anything useful." And every one will recall the passage in "Lavengro" where he speaks of the fit of horrors that attacked his hero, may we not say himself, when recovering from an illness. "In the recollection and prospect of such woe," he asks, "Is it not lawful to exclaim, 'Better that I had never been born'"? And he replies, "Fool, for thyself thou wast not born, but to fulfil the inscrutable decrees of thy Creator; and how dost thou know that this dark principle is not, after all, thy best friend; that it is not that which tempers the whole mass of thy corruption? It may be, for what thou knowest, the mother of wisdom and of great works, it is the dread of the horror of the night that makes the pilgrim hasten on his way. When thou feelest it nigh, let thy safety word be 'Onward!' If thou tarry, thou art overwhelmed. Courage! Build great works; 'tis urging thee." In the passage just quoted Borrow speaks of God's "inscrutable" decrees. After sitting as a young man at the feet of William Taylor and learning from him some philosophy and much scepticism, he had come back to the old Hebrew idea that in religion reverence was the beginning of wisdom. This did not mean that he had discarded Western science, or put a bridle

upon his own insatiable curiosity. No man was more ready to learn what could anyhow or anywhere be learned. It meant that when all had been learned that science could teach, the really vital questions remained still without an answer, because natural science can throw no light on what nature itself really is. The only clue within our reach to that first and last problem lay, in his judgment, with the simple-hearted and lowly- minded, those in whom this wonderful world still aroused wonder. In thus calling to the soul of man not to lose its power of wonder, Borrow is in sympathy with the deepest thought of our time. For ah! how surely,

How soon and surely will disenchantment come,

When first to herself she boasts to walk securely,

And drives the master spirit away from his home;

Seeing the marvellous things that make the morning

Are marvels of every day, familiar, and some

Have lost with use, like earthly robes, their adorning, As earthly joys the charm of a first delight,

And some are fallen from awe to neglect and scorning. {12} Let us say then with the ancient seer: "As for me, I would seek unto God; which doeth great things and unsearchable, marvellous things without number."

Footnotes:

{12} Robert Bridges, Prometheus the Firegiver, 824.

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