

THE GLOOMY DEAN

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“THE ablest Englishman now living”, was the judgment passed upon the subject of this article by a learned and eloquent canon of the Anglican Church in the hearing of the writer. To live up to such an encomium in an age when Balfour, Bernard Shaw, Chesterton, and Hardy are still active, puts a heavy responsibility upon a man. If it had been intended to convey the idea of superlative genius, one would have felt bound to quarrel with the estimate on the score of extravagance. If the meaning was that here might be found a nature of high original gifts, to which had been imparted a culture beyond that of the vast majority of his contemporaries, indorsement would be almost unanimous.

For the mental endowment of Dean Inge is not of the order of genius, but of talent; yet of talent polished to the highest power. The vision and the faculty divine do not shine upon that brooding brow. He will not leave behind him a legacy of original thought. His mind is critical, and only in slight degree creative. He has not like McTaggart, evolved, nor like T. H. Green, interpreted, a great philosophical system. His book on Plotinus hardly touches that level. If his earlier training had been of a scientific cast, his powers of observation, his reverence for fact, and his command of the inductive process, would have qualified him for rank among the foremost men of science. Knowing little or nothing of his upbringing, one may guess that at school and college mathematics was not his strongest point. His intellect is of the discursive sort; his mind is sweeping rather than minute; he lives in the air of large generalizations. He is never more at home than in feeling after the principles of which phenomena are the illustration, and hammering those principles out into a law.

Even so, he has the ear of mankind. The civilized world waits upon his opinion, as upon perhaps two or three others of his cloth; Cardinal Mercier before his departure from this mortal scene, and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Equal in influence, these are, however, distinct in sphere; the former being remarkable chiefly for moral heroism and philanthropic zeal, the latter for wisdom and greatness of heart. In Dean Inge the public reveres a mind capacious enough to look all round an idea, and a learning vast enough to set that idea in its true relation to the remainder of knowledge.

The range of his erudition is remarkable. Casual references in his writings would suggest an immense amount of reading; almost every book of consequence seems to have been deflowered of its treasures and hived away in the cells of his brain. Like Goldsmith's schoolmaster, it is a marvel how one small head can carry all he knows. Granting what is said by some of his detractors, that his learning is general rather than specialist and intimate, we have here none the less a wealth of acquisition quite encyclopedic in its magnitude. On one topic he seems to have gleaned the riches of every possible field. The death of Baron von Hugel left him the unchallenged master of the difficult subject of mysticism.

The variety of his knowledge is as admirable as its range. Here at hand are two volumes of "Outspoken Essays". How numerous the titles, how diverse the lines of thought! From a *Confessio Fidei* to Eugenics, from Democracy to Economics, the writer leaps with ease and freedom. Here is another volume of "Lay Thoughts", representing casual contributions to the daily press. The table of contents is subdivided into four sections—literary, political, social and religious. Within these limits may be found studies of such topics as tradition in poetry, proverbs, letter-writing, diaries, the war losses, American character, the Jews, the birth rate, Utopias, spoon-feeding, psychotherapy, schoolboy stories, the Lambeth Conference, psychology and the mystics, Modernism, and the Lives of Christ. There is no thinness about the treatment; each topic is dealt with interestingly. There are flashes of fun, and chuckles of laughter, as if the sun had caught the sword of thought in the act of lunging at the subject. The underlying vein is serious, however; there is no attempt to play with great issues. We are in contact with a mind which has its own opinions, and fears to cross blades with no man.

Some think that we can place the style in which these views are expressed on an equal level with that of the great masters of English utterance. But there is not the swing of Bolingbroke, nor the sweetness and ease of Newman, nor the imaginative riot of Ruskin, nor the epigram of Dryden, nor the simplicity and clearness of Matthew Arnold. It is a scholar's style, learned not on the street nor on the hustings, but in the world of books and in converse with men of thought and refinement. There are too many Latin roots in it for John Bright—it is too straight and direct for Gladstone—it is not homely or racy enough for the taste of Cobbett. It would never do for parliament or for the platform; a Hyde Park crowd would yawn and turn away jeering, to some demagogue who talked Cockney. And yet it is in some respects a style of con-

siderable power. One could not say that, like poetry in Milton's famous definition, it was simple, sensuous, passionate. But it has great clearness; no one can deny Dean Inge the gift of intelligibility. His speech is water wherein lies the face of the idea. There is richness also, an allusiveness borne of the assimilation of spoil won from the fields of literature, of poetry, and of history. One of the greatest writers of this sort was Lowell, who could hardly touch a subject without everything he had read or heard upon it tumbling out. There need be nothing of the pedant about such a way of writing. The brain of the pedant is a mass of pigeon holes; that of the scholar is like the cells of the beehive, rich in flower-wealth elaborated into honey. And then both clarity and richness are seasoned with epigram. Here is one; "Democracy dissolves communities into individuals, and collects them again into mobs". It would be hard to find a terser or more comprehensive flash of thought fused with wit. There is a ring of Bacon in it. It is an electron from the radium of the brain.

First among the characteristic intellectual tendencies of the Dean might be set down a passion for truth, blent with a profoundly questioning spirit. He has no idols. There is entire independence of view. No theological bias sways him when discussing such doubtful topics as birth-control or evolution. He has no shibboleths. He fears not to run a tilt with the sacrosanct idea of democracy. He excels also in the art of detachment, the power of coolly appraising a mass of facts sans prejudice and in their mutual relations and values. We must expect in such a man the limitations of his mentality. We need not expect him to be as great in enthusiasms as in width of view. The gloomy Dean would be a greater man if he could forget. There would not then be such a veil of disillusionment covering his writings. His enthusiasms seem to have foundered in the sea of his learning. The contrast between him and the rollicking Chesterton is complete. The latter the Paladin of writers, breaking a lance against all sorts of windmills, espousing the cause of any number of elderly maiden ladies sitting forlorn and deserted in the field of thought; laughing, rioting, and happy amidst all his epigrams, until he almost persuades us to believe that there is something in these lost causes on whose behalf he careers around on horseback so wildly, shaking his falchion at foes and friends alike! It is hard to disagree with a fellow whose temper is so charming. The former looking out on his generation with far greater knowledge, with a much keener insight, but with less hope! Another dignitary of the Church, Bishop Gore, shares this temper, but with a different emphasis. He regards the world as drifting into an Inferno for

want of moral discipline. Inge's melancholy is that of the scholar, as it is depicted in Durer's "Melancholia", where the Genius of Knowledge sits among the apparatus of her science, sad-faced and disenchanting. Learning but no joy, as with Cleon in Browning's poem. One comes to believe that a few truths firmly held are better than an omniscience which kills enthusiasm.

It must not be supposed that Dean Inge resembles another Dean of his Church, also a master of English style, and also gloomy, Dean Swift, in sitting loose to religion. He is, in reality, instinctively religious. Dogma and orthodoxy do not hold him, although his article *Confessio Fidei* was a surprise to many for its acceptance of the leading articles of the creed. It is the soul of a dogma that he seeks. His object is that strange elusive thing called spirituality. This is one reason for his resort to mysticism. The range of experiences falling under that term is easier of acceptance than a philosophy which his critical and historical faculties warn him it is becoming more and more difficult to demonstrate. We wonder whether he has knocked around much among hardheaded practical men, who have never had the mystic's vision and yet still hold to their belief in God. What could a trained logician make of mysticism, or a cool scientific mind like that of T. H. Huxley?

The question is being freely asked on every hand, "Is Christianity any longer defensible?" The man in the street is asking it, no less than the man in the study. Indeed the latter has been asking it for fifty years back. The New Renaissance has had him in its grip. Science has opened to him a universe of energy starting from points of inconceivable smallness, and running up into combinations of almost infinite magnitude. The *Genesis* story of creation seems static in comparison, unless taken as a hymn or myth. Criticism has quite revolutionized his early beliefs on inspiration, shifting the emphasis from the word to the person, and from the letter to the spirit. The Bible is not science, and much of it does not seem to be history. He must distinguish between fact and parable; if he wants to hold his creed, he must resort to allegory, like some of the early Fathers.

The average man has not time, nor training, nor talent to make these distinctions. He is impatient of such Pickwickian methods. Surely in a volume written for man's salvation things can be settled by a blunt Yes or No; what need of all this shading? The consequence of such downrightness is that he either bolts his science, and keeps his faith, or he drops the entire religious business. His two poles are Fundamentalism and Nothingarianism; rarely does he seek shelter in Modernism as a halfway house. Taught

for ages that Christianity is a religion, whose roots are in history, an instinct has grown up in his mind that leads him to suspect a scholarship that strikes at that history. A revelation conveyed through fact he can understand; it is in harmony with the intensely practical character of his life and struggle; but a revelation where fact is sublimated into philosophy, or regarded as having value only in so far as it is the instrument through which allegory shadows forth truth, he has no use for. He asks for a faith on which he can stand with both feet, not one to be sought for yonder amidst the clouds.

Dean Inge is a scholar, and his sympathies are to a large degree Modernist. We say to a large degree, for he has never so far as we are aware identified himself with any party or school of thought in the Church. He is probably like F. W. Robertson, of too large a size to feel free in any party tent. Or, like Phillips Brooks, he may rank the spiritual essence of religion so high as to be in a measure indifferent to the manner of its intellectual statement. Here and there in his works there are traces of the traditional belief, which surprise us. The *Confessio Fidei* given in "Outspoken Essays", leaves very little that the orthodox mind can question. In respect of the Incarnation it seems singularly true to that which has been handed down from the time of Councils. The identification of the Word or Logos with Christ is treated as certain, and as being still an integral part of the Christian religion. Despite all this, it is easy to feel a main current of thought setting in the direction of more recent interpretations of the basis of the Christian position. The influence of those interpretations shows itself in the tendency to shade the value of the theistic proof which thinkers of the school of Flint once put forward as invincible, while the effect of critical enquiry is to be seen in the Dean's attitude towards the Synoptic problem and the Fourth Gospel. Christian experience, a personal converse with Christ rising to its highest intensity in the Mystical Union between the human and the Divine, is emphasized as the unbreakable bond assuring us of truth. He would say with Myers:

Whoso has felt the Spirit of the Highest
Cannot confound or doubt Him or deny.
Yea with one voice, O world, though thou deniest,
Stand thou on that side, for on this am I.

Fascinating as this view appears to the soul of the mystic himself, it seems open to objection on two sides. It certainly undervalues the rational proof of Theism and Christianity—a proof not perhaps convincing of itself, and yet forming as strong a

chain of cumulative argument on the whole as most men act upon in daily life. It forgets also, as has been said above, the form which religion often takes in the case of the average man, a form where the emotions and aspirations are in the main rudimentary, and where religious beliefs, duties, and activities stand out as most important.

Perhaps one of the best explanations of The Gloomy Dean's melancholy is that it is temperamental. There are natures everywhere which suffer from a deficiency of hope. It is constitutional with them—part of their very make-up. They can no more help it than could Hamlet. One of these natures was that of another great clergyman, Robertson of Brighton. He remarks in one of his letters: "My great defect is the want of hope." That mingling of the elements which makes some men born rationalists, and others natural believers, undoubtedly operates upon the disposition also, endowing fortunate souls with the magic gift of optimism, and clouding many an interior sky with the eclipse of hope.

May not this be in part at least responsible for the Dean's low temperature reading of the future? He finds little to expect from democracy. The outlook for organized religion is, in his judgment, anything but favourable. And in a recent book on "England"—after tracing with the hand of a master the development of the little island from savagery to empire—he marshals statistics to prove the downfall of her commercial supremacy, and questions sadly what will soon be left. The strange thing is that he seems to give so little place in his estimate to the imponderable forces which have meant so much in English history. There is a curious power of revival in the Anglo-Saxon. He does not know when he is beaten in politics or religion, any more than in physical combat. The last—and many will think the finest—example of this is the indomitable way in which he has shouldered the superhuman burden of war debt. But no man who is himself deficient in hope can fully gauge the intrepid gallantry shown in hours of emergency by that blend of various elements known as the English spirit.

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This article would stretch out to undue length if it attempted a critical survey of all the opinions of Dean Inge. The range is too vast; each department would require an expert for its thorough discussion. Two or three points may be briefly touched in conclusion.

The empery of the schoolmen may have fallen into ruins—we may not be able to speak nowadays of the doctors of the Church as sole leaders in philosophy. But to those who long to see Chris-

tianity present to the world an articulated scheme of thought for its intellectual guidance, it is a matter of pride that one of the foremost teachers of the hour should be a priest of one of the branches of that Church, and that his utterances should be received with the weight and seriousness which attach to the words of Dean Inge.

Moreover it would be an injustice to imagine that the only emanations from his brain are of a serious character. The popular name for him—The Gloomy Dean—may find some justification in the occasional sombreness of the oracles he utters; but in all his works there is a play of humour. The relish for a brilliant *jeu de mots*, the love of a smart repartee, the enjoyment of a school-boy's topsy-turvy understanding, the delight in a splendid Irishism, are manifest now and then even in the gravest studies of our modern world-problem. The most savage iconoclasms, the most daring attacks on superstition and fetichism, are savored, not as with his great predecessor the Dean of St. Patrick's, with an almost brutal irony and sarcasm, but with flashes of humour which betoken the presence of a kindly heart.