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BOSTON OF ETTRICK

IN SCOTLAND'S gallery of forgotten greatness none have faded so far into the shades as Thomas Boston who, though he spent most of his life in the lonely vale of Ettrick, won a national reputation which placed his work next to the Bible and Shakespeare.

Boston began his troubled life at Duns in the year 1676. He studied at Edinburgh University. Little is known of his life as a student except that he was a solitary, underfed fellow given to melancholy and faintness; his entire expenses for 1694 were £11. He secured a licence to preach in 1697 and remained a probationer for two years as he incurred the dislike of the heritors whose approval had to be won in those days before a call was forthcoming. Boston, penniless and unknown, yet independent and determined, refused to bow in the pulpit to them and continued to preach in a pointed manner which was resented.

Eventually, he was called to Simprin, now Swinton. On the 6th December, 1699, he makes this characteristic entry in his journal:

This day I went to Simprin for good and all. On Thursday the wagons with the furniture came from Duns; my father coming along on my horse. I took up house with him and Alison, my cousin, as servant. The manse being in ruins I settled in an old house in the west end of the town. Things being put in some order that night and the morrow, as I walked the floor, seeing myself in my own house, and thought that now I had it confirmed anew that worldly things are greater in expectation than in fruition.

Simprin was out of the world; a small neglected parish of eighty-eight souls. Boston was often depressed but he resolved to formulate principles of study and pastoral supervision. With very few books and almost no stimulus he applied himself to the most complex problems of life and religion. His days were brightened by his marriage to Catherine Brown of Barhill of whom he wrote:

Whenever I saw her a thought struck through my heart about her being my wife. She was a woman of great worth whom I therefore passionately loved and inwardly honoured. A stately, beautiful comely personage, truly pious and fearing the Lord, of a courtly temper, patient in our common tribulations and under her personal distresses. During the time we have had together, we have passed through a sea of trouble as yet not seeing the shore but afar off.

Boston's diary is a remarkable piece of self-revelation and it is difficult to understand why it is so little read to-day. Boston records every detail of his daily life and thought with a twentieth-century frankness. An uneasy, troubled figure wrestling with the exquisite burden of existence emerges from its pages though he was hailed everywhere as a mighty preacher of sure things. We are shown the greatness and the narrowness of a gifted soul and are given a vivid picture of a powerful mental life spent among the lonely hills of Border land.

After eight years at Simprin, Boston was called to Ettrick. Boston, who subjected every action and thought to ruthless self-criticism, plunged into a long session of deep analysis of his motives and finally decided to accept but was very quick to rebuke himself for being cheerful over the impending change as the following entry shows:

This morning I found there was a sad change upon me; my frame of mind was gone, my spirit straitened and in every way unfit for the work of the day and therewith came on a great darkness as to my call to Ettrick and an uneasiness has been on my spirit most of this day with respect to my going to that place to minister to that people. The reason of this sad alteration I found in my misbehaviour of last night for Mr. Adam Milne coming up to see me at night I gave way too much to carnal mirth and laughter till I forgot my work and out of woeful self-confidence would not withdraw from him. It was no time for me to be so merry when my people were so sad.

The parish of Ettrick has its centre in the upper reaches of Ettrick Water and the church is situated where the hills go higher and closer together. Though less renowned than the valley of Yarrow, Ettrick is not without its treasures of song and legend. It has served often as the setting of a Border ballad and battle. Apart from much improved roads and modern dwellings, the valley remains much as it was in Boston's time and a pilgrimage to the old churchyard where Boston was buried is likely to prove a solitary one, for even to-day it is a remote region and in winter it is frequently sealed off from Selkirk, the nearest town eighteen miles away.

Boston did not like his new parishioners. He described them as "naturally smart and of an uncommon assurance; self-conceited and censorious to a degree". Five years later he liked them less and he wrote:

In the visiting of the parish I am extremely discouraged. The ministry of this Church is like to die unlamented. I have no sympathy for many of my people or next to none. I find myself in great danger of melancholy and am

more broken that way than ever; and unless God would help, there is no help from any other quarter. The disregard of the people of Ettrick leads me to speak plainly from the pulpit.

The minister of Ettrick did not spare his words as this extract from a sermon shows:

Our parish is not great but our congregation is feeble. When I come into the Church and the worship is begun I will see some of you sitting and standing in the Churchyard in pairs. Some will spend a good part of the sermon about the dykes. Aye, and go out of the Church at any hour and lie about the dykes and crack. I cannot get you pleased with short enough preaching though some of you make it short enough what with your sleeping, what with your leaving it even when there is no milking; and some will sit at the door all the afternoon that they may get away when they have got enough of it. . . . Weep over the loose lives of many of us. Weep over the woeful divisions among us. I tell you that your security and unconcernedness at this time is more dangerous than ye are aware of. We have made ourselves singular in our backwardness in the cause of God beyond all our neighbours. Take heed God make not an end as remarkable ere all be done.

Despite this indifference Boston faithfully fulfilled all his duties. He drove his horse all over his scattered parish and himself to strenuous studies. The accentuation of the Hebrew Bible attracted his attention. These accents do not belong to the original; they were added centuries later as a guide to pronunciation, but Boston did not know this and he searched for years among these accents for a divine meaning. This was a futile dream and his book on the subject, published at Amsterdam,¹ is the most curious that ever came out of a Scottish manse. There was, however, another work, based on his sermons, over which Boston spent much time and thought. This was called *Human Nature in its Four-fold State* and it became a best-seller for a hundred years. In many a Scottish drawing-room and shepherd's cottage the book lay beside the Bible. The Bible and Boston were considered inseparable.

The work took twelve years of preparation and there were many delays in publication due to causes varying from the author's diffidence to the Rebellion of 1715. Finally, a Treasurer of the City of Edinburgh, Wightman by name, a literary fop, took the work in hand and the story of his alterations and revisions is an amusing one though Boston did not think so as he rushed from Ettrick to Edinburgh to save his book from Wightman's folly in the printing presses.

¹ See Dr. Bowman's article in this issue, p. 62.

Boston believed that everything connected with this volume was the work of Providence. For him there were no natural causes. Every incident and circumstance was a sign of Divine wrath or approval. There can be little doubt that this strict and sometimes superstitious view of life helped to wear him out. Yet it gave to all his work a ring of convincing certainty which much impressed his readers. The *Four-fold State* is not only unread but unreadable to-day. Boston's style, however, has attractions as Stevenson among others have found. It has a graphic and, occasionally, a Shakespearean quality. He warns the profligate that he cannot expect to "leap out of Delilah's lap into Abraham's bosom". He describes the soul assured of faith as "like that babe in the ship-wrecked woman's arms on the plank, smiling amid the waves, unconcerned with the hazard". He writes thus of his wife's mental collapse:

The 10th day of May this year was a day remarkable above many . . . being that wherein my wife was seized with that heavy trouble, which hath kept her all along since that time unto this day, in extreme distress, her imagination being vitiated in a particular point; and that improved and wrought by the grand adversary to her great disquietment; the which has been still accompanied with bodily infirmities and maladies, exceeding great and numerous.

A good example of his distinctive oratorical powers is his plea before the Commission to allow him to decline the call to Closeburn. The fame of the minister of Ettrick was now national and his church was becoming a place of pilgrimage. Many made long and arduous journeys to crowd into the little church by Ettrick Water and Boston, now on better terms with his people, had no wish to leave:

It is with the utmost concern I see myself sisted to appear before this Commission of the General Assembly in a process for transporting me to the parish of Closeburn, having hoped that such an obscure person as I might have finished his course and ministry without being heard in such a judicatory. Moderator, when I consider how hard my work has been in the parish of Ettrick by reason of the divisive temper which has prevailed in that place, it fills me with confusion and terror to think I am in hazard of being thrown into a far hotter flame. I find myself so straitened that I cannot forbear to say with all deference to my revered Judges that the transporting of me to Closeburn will in effect be a driving of me into a snare where, whichever way I turn, I must be broken.

Boston was not an Assembly figure, though at the Assembly of 1729 he made a sensational appearance by being in a minority of one. He did not press his objection to the decision of the Church on a heresy case but the spectacle of one man standing alone in the Courts of the Church made a deep impression.

While Scotland rang with the story Boston urged on his horse through Peebles to Traquair and over the Paddy Slacks to Yarrow, Tushielaw and home to record conscientiously in his diary:

I came home from Edinburgh on Wednesday and found my family, by the mercy of God, no worse than I left. I had a cough and a pain in my back. By reason of that pain in my back it was with great difficulty that I could change my sitting posture into an erect one. It had been brought to this height by means of the extreme long sittings we had at the Assembly in the Professor Simson [heresy] affair.

The crowds at Ettrick grew greater but Boston's health declined, due, as we now know, to a vitamin deficiency. He preached to the end and, when he could walk no more, the people gathered under his manse window to hear his last words advocating his ruling passion—the need of self-examination which he observed so constantly and so painfully and which he recorded in detail in the journal of his life. This private diary is of permanent worth since it offers us many fascinating glimpses of life and religion in rural Scotland in the early eighteenth century; it is a guide to Ettrick valley, full of vivid pictures of ways and customs long departed and, above all, it is the record of a man's intense struggle with himself and, therefore, of abiding psychological value.

A. G. REEKIE.

*Walkerburn,
Peebleshire.*