

Arthur's Memoir

I think before I proceed further, I ought to take the reader into my confidence, and explain how difficult it is for me, or indeed how difficult it would be for anyone, to write any sort of life of Sabine.

A friend of mine, who as a boy, from reading his books, had created for himself a sort of hero-worship of my half-brother, was ordained at the same time as myself in Exeter Cathedral. He had taken a Curacy at Plymouth, and I went to be Sabine's Curate at Lew Trenchard. I was able to introduce him to Sabine, and his admiration for him greatly increased. Thereafter he set himself to collect all book written by Sabine, and continued his collection till every known work stood in his book-shelves. How great was the task, you may imagine, if you turn to the list at the end of this book. It involved searching the second-hand bookshops all over the Kingdom, travelling to all points of the compass. He has in his collection more of Sabine's books than has the British Museum. He, I thought, was the man to write a Life of Sabine. He declined. He said no-one could, there was not material enough on which to compose a book, besides he only knew him personally so little.

I felt myself that some account ought to be given of his life, for he is one of the great Sons of Devon, and his name, if only from the fact that he wrote "Onward Christian Soldiers", is a well-known name. There are frequent mentions of his name on the Wireless, and for some reason, the writers of really popular hymns evoke particular interest in their story.

So I determined to try and write of him myself, and I will mention the difficulties with which I was confronted.

First, he was thirty-one years older than myself. I was born in the same year that he was ordained. Then, for more than another thirty years I scarcely knew him at all. All I did know of him was gained from chance visits to Lew House. It was only in 1895, when I became his Curate that I grew to know him intimately.

I think, however, that I came to know him more thoroughly after I had left Lew Trenchard, for year by year, I spent four weeks' holiday almost entirely at Lew at my mother's house, for she had gone there to live. Then almost every evening, I either dined with him or walked down the hill for a chat, and that went on till his death.

He seemed pleased to have my company, for he was a very lonely man. He was by no means a hermit, and enjoyed receiving the visits of his friends in the neighbourhood, and returning their calls. But those who could really enter into his interests, and discuss the deeper things of life were scarcely ever available. The two that I remember were Robert Burnard of Plymouth, who accompanied him when he went on his antiquarian expeditions, digging for remains, and excavating on Dartmoor, and Daniel Radford of Mount Tavy, Tavistock, to whom he dedicated his West Country Songs, for he it was who had first urged him to begin that work, a work that Sabine always said was the most important thing he had ever undertaken, and I have heard him say, that if he was ever remembered after he was dead, it ought to be for the fact that he had collected the Songs when he did, for later the old singing men from whom he had gathered them would have been dead and their songs perished with them.

His older friends, like the Rev. J. M. Gattril and Canon Fowler, who had shared his earlier life, and others, all died before him or had become too feeble for the long journey to Devon.

So I was left, as I felt perhaps better than nobody, and indeed there were topics on which I could enlighten him, topics in which he was more interested than in anything else. He loved to hear by word of mouth what was going on in the Church of England. It had happened that I had taken part in quite a number of Missions in different parts of England, and could also give him an account of the Church in Wales after Disestablishment.

He was a good talker, and, with one exception, would talk on any question, sitting in his armchair by the great granite fire place, with its huge logs even in summertime, and he, smoking a long pipe, the use of which he had only come when, I think, he was in his seventies. He suffered from bronchitis and the doctors had given him some anti-bronchitis stuff to smoke. He matriculated with that, and proceeded with the real thing, and would puff away with the best.

But the one thing he would never talk about was his inner life, his spiritual struggles, what doubts or difficulties he had conquered, how he had been led to take Orders, and what his thoughts were on his ordination. In his Reminiscences, he dismisses his Ordination in a couple of lines, and makes fun of the Bishop in his first, and as far as I know, his only interview with him. That he was deeply read in the troubles of the soul is obvious from his spiritual writings, but though he would speak of the troubles and trials of the souls of others, I never heard him speak of his own trials.

Also, he was very reticent in regard to the pecuniary trials he must have gone through with fourteen children to bring up, and the rebuilding of Lew House must have cost thousands. One could mention other matters, which one would quietly discuss with an intimate friend, that with him ever remained behind the barrier. I always had the feeling that it was not within one's power to understand his character, and I doubt if anyone did, with one exception, and that was with Grace, his wife. I think she did really understand him, and when she died, he was a very forlorn and forsaken man, and it was a true inscription that he had written on her tombstone, "the half of my life".

But you say, were there not his Reminiscences to help you? That I am sorry to say was not the case. There they are, two volumes containing together some six hundred pages, but they deal very little with his personal life. Nearly half of them are filled with descriptions of countries and places that the ordinary mortal has never heard of, or if indeed he has, would hardly be interested in, as Sabine describes their scenery or narrates their history. He gives long accounts of kings and grand dukes and loved heroes, but I am pretty sure that, with the ordinary reader, they would excite but small interest. His Autobiography contains descriptions of various districts, curious characters, and a series of pen pictures of various leaders in the Oxford Movement and others, but again these would be of little interest, except to a few students. Then there are comments on every sort of thing, criticisms of any number of people, especially himself. He loved to parade his weaknesses, but never goes beneath the surface, so that one could see what the real man is like.

His two books are entertaining, there are some fine passages, which, later on, if I may be allowed to quote, but about himself there is so little. Everything is there except himself.

There is one more source, which has helped numerous biographers, namely the letters the subjects of the biographies have written, but in this case the ground is completely blank. It

is true he may have written interesting letters, but I have never heard of or seen one, except two or three in his Reminiscences full of description of scenery and of some particular place. In my time I had many letters from him, but scarcely one that exceeded in length what could be contained on one half of one side of a sheet of note paper.

What then can one do? In the first part of his Reminiscences, there are here and there little incidents, trifling indeed, but one can make the most of them, as they perhaps will help one to illustrate the formation of his character. It may be we shall see how Our Lord's parable might be quoted with reference to Sabine. It is the parable of the grain cast into the ground, 'which grows, man knows not how, and the earth produces first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear'. Sabine's life was, as it were, planted in Continental ground, then afterwards you see the blade at Cambridge and at Hurstpierpoint, then the ear at Horbury, at Dalton, at East Mersea, where he produced his Magnum Opus, "The Lives of the Saints", and finally in the mellow autumn of his days, when at Lew, book after book was brought forth, till in his 90th year he brings his life to a close with his Reminiscences, surely the 'full corn in the ear'.

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