

Uncle Tom Cobley

Onward Christian Soldiers: A Life of Sabine Baring-Gould.

By W.E. Purcell (Longmans, 21s).

BARING-GOULD 1834-1924, my hymn book calls him, and prints

"On the Resurrection morning", "Through the night of doubt and sorrow," "Daily, daily sing the praises." "Hail the sign, the sign of Jesus," "Now the day is over," and "Onward Christian Soldiers." I was also dimly aware that he had written many volumes of the lives of the saints.

I had no idea of the immense range and vitality of his life and writing; and I am grateful to Mr. Purcell for putting it all together for us.

He wrote 130 books, 30 of them novels, and it was for this that he was at one time best known. J.M. Barrie wrote in 1890 "Of our eight or ten living novelists who are popular by merit, few have greater ability than Mr. Baring-Gould." Mr. Purcell hints that most of them were potboilers; but one of them at least, *Mehalah*, was a work of power. But these novels were but a part of a wider output of popular theology, church history, devotional books, antiquarianism, and much else. Nor was it only a matter of sitting in a study; in his later years he spent much time with two friends collecting the folk-songs of Devon. One of them was "Old Uncle Tom Cobley and all." (I think *Widcombe-in-the-moor* might well put up a statue to Baring-Gould inscribed "To the Founder of our Fortunes from the Grateful Inhabitants" - the song alone must be worth many hundreds of pounds a year to them).

And literary output was only part of a life which included the regular work of a country parson, and raising a family of 15, and (once again) much else. It is in the book, and if eccentric vitality interest and amuse you, this is the book for you. It is full besides of other eccentrics - Hawker of Morwenstow for example, founder of the Harvest Festival who kept a pet pig which followed him on his pastoral visits but was left outside if the visited objected and who excommunicated his cat for killing a mouse on Sunday.

There are omissions, of course. I particularly regret that in his discussion of "Onward Christian Soldiers" and its critics, Mr. Purcell did not find space to give wider currency to the parody of verse 3 (which emanated, I think, from an ecumenical conference in the '30's) -

Like a mighty tortoise/Moves the Church of God; Brothers, we are treading/Where we always trod. We are not united/We always disagree

On things of faith and doctrine/While as for charity - !!

But to be more serious, he has resurrected the next verse which makes the transition from the Church to "Crowns and thrones may perish" - a fine eschatological verse that I hope will be restored (slightly amended) in future editions of our hymn books.

Affectionate ?

The "blurb" speaks justly of Mr. Purcell's "humorously affectionate" biography. This suggests (I think also justly) that the book does not quite get to grips with the man. (His own two volumes of *Reminiscences* were curiously impersonal). I would like to know more about that mill-hand

wife (did the other wives feel she was "not quite our class, dear"?) and what lay behind the element of brutality, and the immature cynicism that Mr. Purcell notes in the novels? And occasionally the writing is almost corny: "How or by what incident this rare creature took Sabine by storm, it is impossible now to say. Perhaps she was the lass by whose side he is said to have walked ... when 'Onward Christian Soldiers' first burst upon the world. Perhaps she was the girl he heard, in her cottage home, bemoaning the fact that she had no new bonnet for the occasion, and whom he told she would look as pretty without one ... Perhaps we cannot really know."

But it would be unfair and ungenerous to carp. What stands out is the exuberant vitality of the man, his readiness to "have a bash" with vigour at anything he wanted to do. As Mr. Betjeman hints in the foreword, no one nowadays would get away with a tenth of what he did; and it would be the local authorities and the Inland Revenue as much as the church dignitaries who so failed to honour him or use his gifts as a popularizer that would stop him. But perhaps we ought to try harder. (B.W. 13.6.57)

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