

Literary Veteran

Rev. S. Baring-Gould at Four Score & Ten `Western Morning News' Interview

Fifty years ago an Essex rector, then approaching his 40th year, inherited, on the death of his father, the family estate of Lew Trenchard, Devon. With a ready pen, and great industry in the collection of facts, he had published books on history, folklore and mythology. Succeeding to an encumbered estate, and determined to restore its economic stability, he began to write in earnest. To-day the Rev. S. Baring-Gould sits in his splendid library, amongst the works of his study and the creations of his genius, long recognized as one of England's most informative writers, author of some of our most arresting romances of rural life, and an authority unquestioned on things that matter in the natural history of social England. With the beginning of the New Year he will be in his 90th year of age. He is rector of his parish, patriarch of his household, and, apologizing for a little deafness, engages the welcome guest with fine old-world courtesy in one of the romantic homes of older England, where men may dream and fear not the waking.

The Ghost of Lew Trenchard

Oak-carved, wainscoted, secret-chambered, and with ancestral pictures round the walls, Lew Trenchard turns the imagination to the tales of `merrie England'. Everything about it tells of the days when laws and customs, learning and culture, radiated from our old nobility. It has its history, its legends and its ghost.

The white lady is indeed a well-authenticated feature of Lew Trenchard. In life she was a noble lady, Mr. Baring-Gould's great-great-grandmother, who lived her little life unnoticed and undisturbed. It is not known why she haunts the scene of her domestic peace, but she has been seen, described and identified. She has, in her time, frightened not a few people, and today there are not many who will wander through the avenue of oaks where she is said to take the bracing and enchanted air.

"I have heard many tales of her," said Mr. Baring-Gould, in conducting a representative of "The Western Morning News and Mercury" over the scene. "I have collected them and included them in my reminiscences. But I do not believe in ghosts myself. I generally find when they come to be examined that there is a weak spot in the story. Still, there it is and there are people living to-day who, without knowing anything about her, have described her and her old friend the rector, Parson Ellacombe, too, as they have been sitting in the drawing-room."

Religious History of England

All of which our representative was told in the teeth of a bitter north-easterly wind, and as, along with his host, he had been bareheaded and without a coat during the greater part of an hour's tour of the grounds, he was not sorry to return to the dining-room and the blazing fire of wood. The talk turned pleasantly to literature.

"These are my works," said the veteran, turning to an ample bookshelf. "Some of them I am pleased with, and the others are very poor. I wrote my last ten years ago, and I am now past story writing. But I am still engaged on a history of English religion since the Reformation. It will never be published - it is altogether too big a work. But it will be presented, typed, to the Cathedral Library of Exeter."

The Lives of the Saints

Of course, I have published books of historical import. I think my 'Lives of the Saints' was a useful book in giving a healthy impression of many characters of legend and superstition. It took me eight years to write and I got very little out of it, but I think it was worth my while. The books are on the 'index' of the Roman Catholic Church, as you might well expect, but I think that was a considerable compliment to my researches. I do not think the saints are any the worse for my little estimates of their lives. I have shown them as human entities and not as cooked up for edification.

Songs of the West

"But I think I have done my best work through my collection of Devon and Cornwall folk songs, especially the melodies. I spent 15 years in the task, and I have travelled all over the county to get the words and music correct. Some of the songs are very beautiful and they are all deeply interesting. I have gone many miles to listen to the old men who knew the old songs. It was by a lucky accident that I heard of an aged man who knew the 'Oxen ploughing' and I took it from him. The May song I gathered at Padstow, and the Furry song at Helston. I was only just in time.

"These songs are never sung now. They are all gone and I do not believe anybody could find them. They are of immense importance. They are our link with remote days, when songs were the only means of impressing the mind, and when history and tradition were all related in ballads. But I hold that the melodies are superior to the words, which latter have often been corrupted.

The Author's Workshop

And now come to my workshop. Into the bulging library Mr. Baring-Gould took our representative, with the pride of the artificer who knows that his work will bear examination. He pointed to a plain

standing desk. "That is where I have done all my work. I have always written standing, because I prefer it, and it is easier for me to consult my authorities. I am afraid I can not do it now."

"About your stories?" asked our representative.

"I wrote my stories because I felt it was necessary for me to earn the money. Yes, I have written many stories. The last was ten years ago, and was the result of a visit to Wales. It is called 'In Dewisland', and I thought it very poor."

How Stories Grow

"Cornwall is very proud of 'The Roar of the Sea'?"

"I believe that was a good story, and had some foundation. I do not know whether I did more or less than justice to cruel Coppinger, but I did my best for him. A better story, I think, is 'Mehalah', which is a tale of the Essex marshes. But personally I like 'The Gaverocks.' It has been very often attacked, but I think it is one of my best. My object was to draw three types of women. I took the highest possible type, the frivolous and as we say, the ordinary woman; and I took the self-sacrificing woman who gives herself for others."

"Do you find your characters, or do you create them?"

"They create themselves. I start with a general plan, and write on, and as I write I find the characters forming. Many times I have found myself floored, and have given up to task for the day, but I just sit in the armchair and the ideas come. It is really as if the figures in the story took possession of one. Yes, I have tried to embody some folk traditions in my stories, and they have seemed to live again in my imagination."

Life and Morality

Asked as to his work in the parish Mr. Baring-Gould said, "I have tried to do my duty as a clergyman. I have always tried to be fair. From the first on coming here I made it my business to be as much a minister to the Nonconformist as to the Churchman, and I think I have been of service to them all. I still conduct services and preach every Sunday. And I make it my business to be of help wherever there is suffering or trouble."

"I take as broad-minded a view as I can of life and of my fellow men. I am not a prohibitionist in any capacity. You can not teach men self-respect by force. But every day shows that we are learning the meaning and the beauty of the honest, sober, and moral life."

Our representative followed his host through a tour of the church and a ramble over the beautiful grounds, and last, a rummage among the bookshelves. He shared his host's tobacco and borrowed his books. And returning behind an old-fashioned cob, through the autumn glowing lanes to the station, took train for Plymouth, grateful for a day spent in the wonderland of a great man's recollections.

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