

PRODIGIOUS LITERARY OUTPUT

(Subheading of an article in a local newspaper published evidently within a year or so of SBG's death)

Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould and his wife, who predeceased him by eight years, are buried side by side in the new part of the churchyard. Their graves are surmounted by a plain monument bearing the simple inscription: "Paravi lucernam Christo meo" (I have prepared a lantern for my Christ); died January 2, 1924." No truer description could be found of Mr. Baring-Gould's productive life.

After a long and active life, Mr. Baring-Gould left the world the richer by varied contributions to literature and by the example of his kindly character. His views of life have been described as fresh and vigorous, his characters lifelike, and his descriptions of scenery were painted with the loving eyes and the skilful hand of a master of his art.

Born at Exeter on January 28th, 1834, he was the eldest son of Edward Baring-Gould, of Lew Trenchard. After a curacy and a vicariate in Yorkshire, he became Rector of East Mersea. While there, his father died, and he inherited the family estates (of about 2,000 acres) at Lew Trenchard.

When his uncle died in 1881, he presented himself to the family rectory of Lew Trenchard, which he held to the end of his life. While curate of Horbury, Yorkshire, he fell in love with a millhand's daughter, and it is said that when he asked her mother for consent to their marriage, she said, "Surely you won't think of such a thing when there are so many wealthy girls about." He replied, "I want someone to save me £100 a year, not to spend it." They were married in 1868, and had 15 children.

He wrote 20 novels in 23 years, among his best known being "John Herring", 1882 (a romantic story of Dartmoor); "Court Royal", 1886 (the scene of which was laid in Plymouth district); "Red Spider", 1887; "Urith", 1890; and "The Gaverocks", "Eve", "Richard Cable", and "Mehalah".

Among his theological writings is "Lives of the Saints", which monumental work he began in the '70s, and was engaged upon for five years. Fifteen volumes saw the light, but the publisher failed before the work was completed. The Vatican placed it on the "Index Expurgatorius". In 1861 he visited Iceland, and the following year published "Iceland Scenes and Sagas".

Rev. S. Baring-Gould was prominently connected with the Devonshire Association and with the exploration of Druidical and Roman remains in Devon, and was a member of folklore and barrow committees, and other antiquarian associations. He earned the Henwood Gold Medal for his contributions to the literature of Cornwall architecture.

A work that continues to be held in high esteem is his collection of the old songs of the West. When quite a lad, if ever he heard a woman singing an unfamiliar ditty at her work he made a note of the song. In 1888 he resumed this work, and collected songs and ballads from the mouths of Westcountry people.

Mr. Charles Dustan, who was Mr. Baring-Gould's coachman for over 50 years, still works in the gardens of the old manor, which has for him many bitter-sweet memories. I found him hoeing a grass border near the sunken rose garden, and he told me how he drove his late master hundred of miles in the Westcountry in a carriage and pair in search of old songs of the West. Mr. Dustan recalled with pride that he taught nine of Mr. Gould's daughters and five sons to ride horseback and drive carriages.

As a hymn writer, the author will long be remembered. He originally wrote "Onward, Christian Soldiers" as a marching "song" for the pupils of a Yorkshire Sunday School, composing the hymn the evening before it was required. His beautiful translation of the verses of the Icelandic poet Ingeman, "Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow", is hardly less known, and he wrote two other hymns, and collected a volume of 44 Church songs.

Much has been written of this wonderful man. In "A Book of Devonshire Parsons" other works are said to have flooded from his pen. Books the author must have enjoyed writing, for he was the living embodiment of the remark, "None so happy as the versatile, provided they have not to earn their bread by it."

His best work treated of Devon, the Devon he loved so well that he could give no better description of the glories of Paradise than to say -

"There the gardens ever blossom
Like our orchards here in May
But the flowers never wither
They eternally are gay."