

THE RELUCTANT RECTOR & HIS MERSEA MASTERPIECE

Robert Waterhouse offers a new assessment of Baring-Gould's "Mehalah," the Mersea melodrama that has been compared with "Wuthering Heights," based on a recently published biography of the remarkable author.

For 90 years the Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould lived a full, varied and mainly happy life. There was just one portion of it, the decade of the eighteen-seventies, on which in old age he looked back without pleasure: that was the time that he spent as Rector of East Mersea. "The Essex peasants," he declared austerely in his "Further Reminiscences" were dull, shy, reserved and suspicious. I never managed to understand them, nor they to understand me." Perhaps neither side tried very hard. The company was not up to scratch. "As far as I could see there were not many persons of value, as readers and thinkers, with whom to make friends ... The most intelligent of the farmers was Cant, a strong dissenter."

But it may not have been quite as bad as that at the time. One of the few authentic memories of him that I have traced comes from the grandson of the redoubtable Mrs. Jane Pullen of the Peldon "Rose" - a character in her own right - who was wont to relate that she well remembered Baring-Gould striding about the roads singing hymns loudly and cheerfully to himself. Probably his own hymns.

But glad or glum, the environment and the inhabitants combined to drive him in two directions: abroad in the first place - he travelled much in this decade, and one wonders what was happening to the parish - and into himself in the second. And out of himself there emerged as a legacy of the hated isle - a masterpiece.

Ranks with "Wuthering Heights"

People who come to live on Mersea are told sooner or later that they must read "Mehalah" - the advice being almost invariably coupled with a deprecating grin and the remark "It's awful nonsense, of course." The deprecation is unnecessary.

My first acquaintance with it drove me at once to re-read Emily Bronte's "Wuthering Heights": I did not then know that the comparison had been made many years before - and not in Baring-Gould's disfavour - by Swinburne. Now a latterday writer has made it again, with more thought and care. "Onward Christian Soldier" by W.E. Purcell (Longman's, 21s.) is a full-dress study of a man rare enough almost for that overworked word "unique," a study written with a happy blend of perception, sympathy and irony.

As an author, Baring-Gould reminds one of that freakish genius Ford Madox Ford. Both were great story-tellers, and they shared in varying degree what perhaps may be described as a reluctance to allow the bare facts of a situation to confine the adornment which they placed upon it.

The degree did vary. Baring-Gould had a strong Christian conscience, and in general his elaborations did not extend beyond some curious episodes in his massive "Lives of the Saints." Ford had no conscience whatever, and moreover little regard for the laws of libel and slander.

On the other hand, while Baring-Gould had a somewhat acid perception of the ridiculous, Ford was endowed with a sense of pure comedy. Give him the conjunction of two disparate literary lions such as Henry James and Rudyard Kipling, and he could be richly funny: the fact that nobody believed a word of it could not spoil the story. It was Baring-Gould's strength (and danger) that he was in fact generally believed.

How did he get away with it, wonders Mr. Purcell, of an elaborate literary hoax carried out by Baring-Gould while still an undergraduate at Cambridge, and concludes "Readability combined with plausibility is the answer."

Taken for gospel

Plausibility. Most people on Mersea and many beyond know the story of the twin brothers of Barrow Hill, the tumulus half a mile beyond the Strood on the East Mersea road.

Among the party of Danes who martyred St. Osyth were these brothers, who captured her sister and brought her to Mersea. Here the division of the spoil presented difficulties, which the twins attempted to solve by hacking each other to pieces. On the hillock above the Strood their comrades buried them, together with the ship and the live girl for good measure. But as the moon waxes so does the flesh and sinew grow again and "if you listen at full moon you can hear the brothers fighting below in the heart of the barrow."

So Baring-Gould related in "Mehalah," and was generally credited with having unearthed the tale from some ancient source. He had done better than that: he had made it up on the spur of the moment. Of course it is good orthodox saga-ish stuff, and has many parallels, but to impose on a community a whimsy of your own which in two generations is accepted as genuine folk-lore is a bit of an achievement.

Frantic outbursts

So indeed is "Mehalah" in its entirety. How does it compare with "Wuthering Heights" - for compared they must be? In both the central theme is the overwhelming power of a love which the possessed man considers will transcend death: or, to take another view of it, of a violent and unbridled passion. Here are two parallel passages:

"May she wake in torment!" he cried with frightful vehemence. ... "You say I killed you - haunt me, then! Be with me always - take any form - drive me mad! Only do not leave me in this abyss where I cannot find you! Oh, God, it is unutterable! I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!"

"We cannot live a moment the one without the other. If I were to die you would die too; you would rage and writhe against death but it would come. Death can no more part us than life. We will live together and we will die together, and moulder away in one another's arms. The worm that gnaws me shall gnaw you."

These two frantic outbursts issue, the first from a remote Yorkshire vicarage, the second from a remote Essex rectory. Admittedly these are "strong" passages, but the tone of both books throughout is much in tune with them.

In spite of certain archaisms it is also surprisingly modern; modern in the sense that ruthless egotism - "Bless you, Jack, I'll have what I want when I want it" - is accepted as a natural way

of life and as a matter of course. Nowhere in either of these violent works is there a trace of the Christian ethic, or any place for compassion or humility.

How much is owed?

It is difficult to judge what, or how much, Baring-Gould owes to Emily Bronte. "Wuthering Heights" was published at the end of

1848, "Mehalah" in 1880 - a time-lag, admitted, but the publishing world then did not move so fast and furiously as to-day.

There are parallels in the stories of which space does not permit quotation; for example the old family retainers, Joseph and Abraham, each a prime specimen of, respectively, Yorkshire and Essex cussedness. But whereas Joseph is the stock figure of a rustic brute, Abraham is a real character, observed with care and irony, and with the germs of a dour virtue in him.

Perhaps one may extend that instance to a generalisation. "Wuthering Heights" has its splendours, but the artificial contrivance and the appallingly stilted dialogue make it heavy going to-day. It gave our literary fathers a kick to know that all this Sturm und Drang had been cooked up by a consumptive spinster in a moorland vicarage (with the churchyard draining into it), but the incongruity has lost its novelty.

"Mehalah," on the other hand, though its story is equally if not more ridiculous, is embellished by so much acute observation of the Essex scene, by such pungent character drawing - the alcoholic Mrs. De Witt is a joy for ever - and by a pleasing irony (which occasionally becomes ferocious) that one is swept almost effortlessly over the larger absurdities.

Unhappily, it must be said that this remarkable work is generally available to-day only in a sadly truncated condition. The original has long been out of print, and when (one assumes) the copyright expired in 1950 some enterprising gentleman produced an "abridged" edition. This, while painstakingly preserving the actual sequence of events in every silly particular, has been remorselessly lopped of many of the grace-notes, of the diverting, profound or sour comments on men and matters which give the original its richness.

Prodigious output

Poor Emily produced her masterpiece and died. Baring-Gould threw off "Mehalah" in his stride as just one item in what was for a (nominally) working parish priest a prodigious literary output.

In an idle moment in the British Museum Reading Room recently I counted up the entries under Baring-Gould's name in the catalogues. They amounted to about 226 items, occupying seven full pages (i.e. 14 with addenda) of those vast tomes.

They ranged from the "Lives of the Saints" - 17 volumes, 1872-1889, to "How To Save Fuel," 34 pages, 1874 (really must read that sometime!) Of course the figure naturally includes second and other editions, but it is remarkable enough at that.

On top of all this were the hymns. Mr. Purcell gives us his version of the classic story of the Bishop and "Onward Christian Soldiers." In fact it is Baring-Gould's own version, as quoted from a letter:

I daresay you have heard the story of my bidding the choir alter the line of the hymn from "With the cross of Jesus going on before" to "With the cross of Jesus left behind the door," when the Archbishop of York objected to the cross being carried in procession when he was present at Dalton. The story is apocryphal. He never was at Dalton. The story was invented by my eldest son, when an American interviewer called on him for some "copy" about the hymn; and he invented the story to humbug the interviewer.

Baring-Gould was 84 when he wrote the letter, about events of half a century before. I can only say that by a coincidence, before I read 9

the book, two old Mersea residents told me the same story, freshly and as of fact, about a low-church bishop visiting East Mersea. The only difference was that in their version the line was altered to "hid behind the door" - a rather more telling variant. It doesn't matter. It is a good story - a Baring-Gould story.

17 children

And what was Sabine Baring-Gould like, the man who left Mersea to present himself to his own living among the family's ancestral acres in Devon? He was tall, handsome, usually unsmiling (didn't he ever twitch the lips, writing at his stand-up desk, at some more unusually acid crack?)

His marriage was the sort of romance which could have happened only to him. He, the patrician, picked out a mill-girl from his Yorkshire congregation, sent her away to be educated up to the position of being married to him - and lived completely happily with her for 46 years after. She bore him 17 children, some of whom he did not appear always to know by sight, and most ably backed him in the parish.

For all that, his opinion of women was a poor one. Mr. Purcell wonders if this were so: his doubts would be resolved if he turned to the original (not the chopped) "Mehalah" - (Woman's) ideal world is that of the bees, in which there is but one queen, and all the other she's are stung to death. Eve was the only woman who tasted of happiness unalloyed, because in Eden she had no sister."

Another class of being of which Baring-Gould took a dim view were bishops. This did the Squareson of Lewtrenchard no good, bishops as a class being notoriously sensitive to lack of affection. So not a single ecclesiastical dignity or preferment came his way - not even an honorary canonry. Yet he did not, in the end, pass unremarked: two bishops (and an archdeacon) attended his funeral.

(This newspaper article was taken from the Essex County Standard dated Friday, 28th June 1957.)